# ELECTRONIC SOUND

THE ZINE

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# Sleaford Mods

## New Rage Music

CLOCK DVA / ALEXANDER TUCKER / BEN FROST / POLYPORES / FIELD LINES CARTOGRAPHER / ANDY VOTEL

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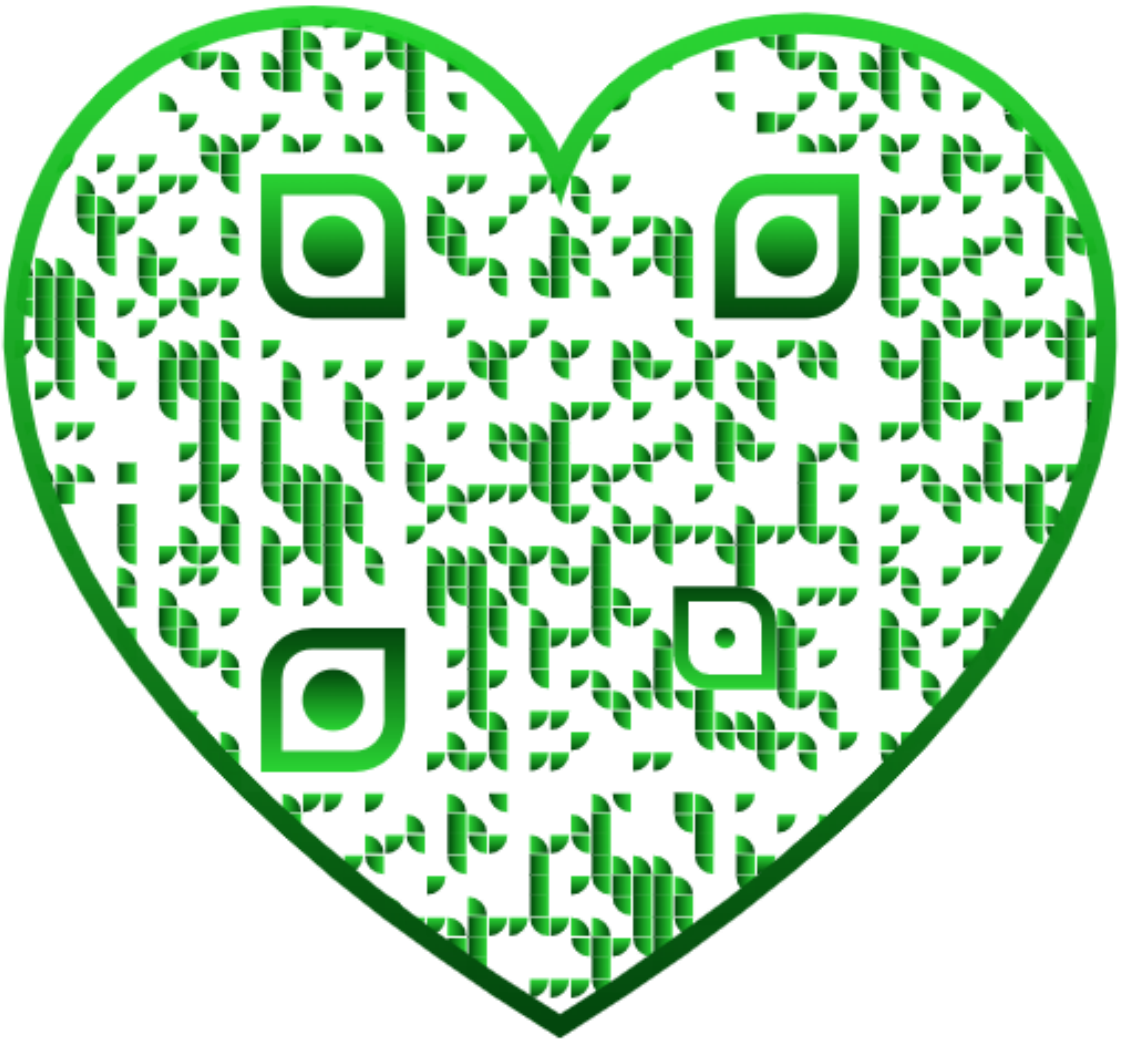

# WELCOME TO ELECTRONIC SOUND



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It's more than 30 years since The Justified Ancients Of Mu Mu declared it was grim up north. These days, with food and energy prices soaring, public services ripped to shreds, and a daily diet of other depressingly bleak stuff on the news, it seems pretty grim right across "this sceptr'd isle", as William Shakespeare poetically portrayed Britain. Nothing seems to work properly anymore. In any way. On any level. Especially our government of "cash-chomping wank rats". That's not another Shakespeare quote, by the way. Sleaford Mods frontman Jason Williamson came up with that one.

We've lots to thank this month's cover stars for. Sleaford Mods' forthcoming new album is called 'UK Grim' and it finds Jason reaching fresh heights of rage at the world around him. And justifiably so. His cohort Andrew Fearn is on fire too, constructing an intense musical backdrop of barbed electronics and driving beats. If you've seen the video for the album's title track – crafted with collage artist and political satirist Cold War Steve – you'll know what to expect and you won't be disappointed. 'UK Grim' is not only the Nottingham duo's angriest record to date, it's almost certainly their best.

When it came to sorting out our interview with Jason and Andrew, which they insisted took place on their home turf, we quickly realised there was only one writer for the job. Step forward Fat Roland, a man with his own axe to grind – albeit a comedy rubber one. The result is a truly fabulous read covering subjects ranging from free market capitalism to rockery mantelpieces by way of The Haçienda, Charlton Heston and TikTok. Or "dogshit" as Jason calls the social media platform. Oh yes, we'd probably better warn you that there's a spectacular amount of swearing in the Sleaford Mods piece. Fucking loads of it. Fucking tons.

As well as our cover story, we also talk to Adi Newton following the release of the first new Clock DVA studio album for three decades and question Alexander Tucker about his posthumous collaboration with Keith Collins, Derek Jarman's long-time partner. Our other features this issue include Ben Frost, Andy Votel, and a double-bubbler with Castles In Space artists Polypores and Field Lines Cartographer. Plus, of course, there's all our usual regulars and columns – featuring David Bowie, Lemon Jelly, Eyeless In Gaza and more – and a couple of gazillion album reviews.

Turn the page and get stuck in!

**Electronically yours,**
**Push and Mark**

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**PUBLISHED BY**
Pam Communications Limited

Studio 18, Capitol House,
Heigham Street, Norwich, NR2 4TE

electronicsound.co.uk
facebook.com/electronicmagazine
twitter.com/electronicmaguk

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# ROCKAWAY BEACH FESTIVAL

**Butlin's, Bognor Regis**

6-8 JANUARY 2023

## WORDS: JAMES THORNHILL

Returning for its seventh edition, Rockaway Beach Festival has turned the dim prospect of an out-of-season Butlin's holiday park into an annual highlight. With a growing reputation for its expertly curated line-up of legends and zeitgeist-bothering new bands, the quota of electronic and esoteric acts has ballooned in recent times, culminating in this year's assortment of riches.

On Friday, there's Acid Klaus, aka Sheffield's outsider pop maverick Adrian Flanagan. Drafting in singer Maria Uzor, he dumps unashamed acid techno bangers with a characteristic wink and a nudge. Elsewhere, the relentless industrial techno onslaught of Bristol's Scalping proves captivating, as harsh riffs, catastrophic synths and pounding live drums transform the place into a sweaty, transcendental rave with several thousand people bouncing around.

Manchester five-piece W H Lung, meanwhile, prove they have a persona for every occasion. Their last album, 2021's 'Vanities', concentrated their electronic elements while subsequent live shows matched it. This time, the group's early evening slot taps into the motorik energy of their acclaimed 2019 debut, 'Incidental Music', magnifying the "rock" in krautrock.

Exemplifying the festival's embrace of more avant-garde talents is Scottish composer Anna Meredith. Clashing with Peter Hook's Joy Division/New Order tribute show on another stage, she attracts a comparatively small crowd, but those in attendance are more than amply rewarded. From glitch-tastic opener 'Sawbones' onwards, no single beat, string pluck, cello stroke or blast of brass feels out of place. Every note of Meredith's mind-altering, genre-busting, uncompromising compositions is perfectly poised – none more so than on her fabulously rousing cover of Elton John's 'I'm Still Standing'.

Saturday night headliners are synthpop overlords Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark. Still carried by original members Andy McCluskey – on typically effervescent form – Paul Humphreys and Martin Cooper, they deliver an arresting set for completists and casual fans alike. Much more than a simple nostalgia act, McCluskey and co are quick to assert their contemporary relevance, opening with 'Atomic Ranch', a critique on consumerism from 2013's 'English Electric' album, and 'Isotype' from 2017's 'The Punishment Of Luxury'.

But it isn't long before the inevitable classics are trotted out, including a mid-set medley from 1981 holy grail 'Architecture & Morality', namely 'She's Leaving', 'Souvenir', 'Joan Of Arc' and 'Maid Of Orleans', in sequence – each one a note-perfect rendition, recalling those heady salad days when OMD were arguably at their peak. They wrap things up with 'Enola Gay' – obviously – but a brief encore brings out early career gems 'Secret' and 'Electricity'. Terrific.

Closing the weekend are Panda Bear and Sonic Boom, the creative duo of Noah Benjamin Lennox and Spacemen 3's Pete Kember. And what a dream pairing they are. Cloaked in near darkness, the two dexterous sonic adventurers construct a strangely reassuring and smile-inducing wave of psych sounds, leaving festival-goers to file out on a high.

With countless other notable moments – we haven't even touched on the immense Melt Yourself Down, Billy Nomates, Yard Act, Self Esteem, Pozi, pool parties, quizzes and artist talks (OMD's being a real eye-opener) – we're only scratching the surface of Rockaway Beach 2023. It begs the question: where will this unmissable festival go next?

OMD

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C. Visit electronicsound.co.uk/sleafordmods to buy this release on its own for £8.99, but be quick because stocks are strictly limited

# Sleaford Mods – ‘The Violent Economy’ / Extnddntwrk – ‘Full Moon’ White vinyl seven-inch

This month’s limited edition seven-inch brings together a brand new Sleaford Mods track and an instrumental cut by Extnddntwrk, the solo project of Mods music man Andrew Fearn

## SLEAFORD MODS – ‘THE VIOLENT ECONOMY’

A previously unreleased Sleaford Mods track recorded in the middle of last year, ‘The Violent Economy’ is exclusive to this Electronic Sound single. With its nagging bass synth backdrop, the three-minute diatribe features Jason Williamson railing against “tossers who think they’re cool” and our dog-eat-dog society, a place with “nowhere to run and nowhere to hide”.

“The violent economy is the stick through the bars of everybody’s cage,” says Williamson. “It’s about capitalism… of course it is. The age-old, one-word description for most of our fucking hospital appointments and the bent, distorted perceptions that age like milk in the sun. It makes us all traders, biting each other to death for bigger stalls.

“I don’t think there’s any escaping the violent economy. From the high-brow, mountain-top mindfulness of Los Angeles, right the way down to the cold-bricked corner at the back of Yankee Chicken in Bulwell, where the cries of 100 obscure lives whip around their exhausted blinks. It whips all and it hates all.

“The violent economy pits those in jobs against each other, layering the antagonism over and over until all you can see in your opponent is white-hot bile. And it makes socially conscious bands look fucking ridiculous. Their morals instantly fly out of the window as the quest for survival and fame demands that they are match-fit. The damp areas around them destabilise almost from the moment they achieve the long climb out of obscurity.”

## EXTNDDNTWRK – ‘FULL MOON’

Andrew Fearn’s solo work as Extnddntwrk might be more introspective than his Sleaford Mods output, but the low-key IDM and wonky vibes are hugely mesmeric. ‘Full Moon’ is a typically immersive instrumental loop steeped in sensuous after-dark electronics.

“I’ve been working with modular gear recently,” says Fearn. “I can work very quickly with it, so when I get an idea or I’m feeling inspired or creative, I can just go to it. I’m often influenced by visuals more than by stuff I hear, so things like watching TV shows and films or going for walks. Even scrolling through Instagram can sometimes be good, too.

“When I make music that I like, I get an image or an idea in my mind almost instantly and something about it just clicks with me. I’ll usually put the track on Dropbox and download it on my phone to AudioShare, so then I can listen to it when I’m travelling or walking. Back when I was skint, I used to make trip-hoppy ambient stuff to listen to… my own personal soundtrack. I’d fill a whole cassette with one long track, almost like some form of protection from the world around me.

“Like a lot of my tracks, ‘Full Moon’ is a diary of where my head was at the time. I did it in November last year, when the nights were starting to draw in and winter was coming. I was feeling melancholic about the past and unsure but excited about the future.”

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## EXPRESS YOURSELF

### Multi-dimensional synth offers total control

As the latest offering from French developer Expressive E, Osmose is a next-gen synthesiser promising new levels of performance, even though it may look just like your average keyboard. But the Osmose is all about maximum expressive control, and is capable of responding to gestural movements like pressing, tapping, strumming or even shaking. It can also produce an astonishing array of sounds and articulations, with the EaganMatrix "digital modular sandbox" sound engine at its core, which was designed by the vaunted minds at Haken Audio. One of the most enjoyable machines we've got our hands on in recent years, the Osmose might be just the thing to take MIDI polyphonic expression to the skeptical masses. Explore it for €1,799. **expressivee.com**

PULSE

## JOSEPH EFI

Dubstep, garage, 'Matrix'-inspired beats

### WHO?

Born in Bradford-on-Avon, raised in Bristol, and now living in London, Joseph Efi's music branches right out of the grime/dubstep/garage family tree. Aside from the bona fide wubs on offer, a murky tenderness lies at the heart of his unique sound. After releasing an EP in 2020, and only a couple of singles since, Efi's much-anticipated debut album, 'Body Lost', is expected in March. He describes it as "a seven-track project loosely based on a character whose spirit becomes entangled in distant digital spheres".

### WHY JOSEPH EFI?

Counting Mala, Burial, Lee Perry and jazz 'n' b vocalist Nai Palm among his foremost influences, Efi's tastes are varied. Yet, despite the free-range listening, Efi is intent on channelling his energies into "merging soft and calming sounds with hard and dark – that's the truly UK sound to me". 'Softly', taken from the upcoming album, is evidence that he's on the right path. Spinning screwface rhythms around bass curdles deep in your eardrum, it's upset only by his own vulnerable vocal melodies that suggest a mellow core.

### TELL US MORE...

If you're anywhere even remotely near the M25, it's worth keeping tabs on his socials. "I saw an audiovisual piece by Ryoichi Kurokawa in London earlier this year that blew my mind, opening my eyes to this whole world of coded art that I didn't know much about," adds Efi. "I'm working on visuals to turn my live shows into more of an audiovisual experience, and I plan to start a regular event that will focus on electronic musicians and artists trying out new material on a really good sound system." If you're in town, get down – see you there.

**ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH**

**'Softly' is out now via Bandcamp. 'Body Lost' follows shortly**

## MEMENTO

### Benge shares retro annual for synth nerds

After announcing the news in last month's Electronic Sound, analogue aficionado Benge has now released 'The Memetune Programme Annual 2023', a 1980s-style book documenting the many highlights from his YouTube series of the same name. Alongside thorough investigations into his museum of synths, the annual comes with two CDs, one full of demos (with sections on monosynths, polysynths, digital and layer synths), and an original album, 'Themes, Indents And Incidental Music'. It doesn't get more essential than this, folks, and you can order your copy now for £35. Mush mush! **zackdagoba.bandcamp.com**

## MUCKY BUSINESS

### Get stuck into the sounds of Scotland

During the first wave of the pandemic, Anton Spice, ES writer and ex-Vinyl Factory magazine editor, found himself stranded on the tiny Isle of Muck, just off Scotland's west coast. Not knowing how long he might have to stay, Spice began recording the sounds of the island and its inhabitants. On returning to London, he produced a sample pack and invited various musicians to create a track using them. Eight compositions were returned, and they form the basis for 'Echo Location', a compilation featuring music from artists such as Penelope Trappes, Awkward Moments and DJ Raff. The album forms part of Isles, a collaborative project between Spice and Ignacia Ossul Vermehren, which documents "the details of texture and sound in remote environments". You can order the £15 limited edition cassette now. **echo--location.bandcamp.com**

## NEEDS MUST

### Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month: **Dynamax Roberts**

Long-time readers of this column may recall my love of 20th century, electronically bolstered hip hop and four-decade friendship with NYC super-rapper Dynamax Roberts. Owing to his memorable stint with Alex Paterson's ambient hip hop spinoff High Frequency Bandwidth in 2009, Dynamax was one of the stars of Alex's biography, 'Babble On An' Ting', which I co-wrote.

Next month sees the fourth volume of The Jeffrey Lee Pierce Sessions Project series I'm involved with finally released. Obviously it's beyond this organ's orbit, but the monstrous track I concocted with Welsh space rockers Sendelica features vocals by Secret Knowledge's Wonder, colossal electro beats and mix by NY studio legend Jay Burnett (of 'Planet Rock' and Beastie Boys fame)… and rap by Dynamax! Not only that, D has just finished his first solo album, 'Love Power & Sound'.

Growing up in the South Bronx, Dynamax was inspired by the hip hop revolution happening around him. He was welcomed by Afrika Bambaataa into his Universal Zulu Nation, aimed at uniting warring gangs with its philosophy of peace, unity and having fun. He was also connected with Ice-T's Rhyme Syndicate and hung with the Cold Crush Brothers.

Relocating to France as the Zulu Nation's European ambassador, Dynamax hooked up with Dee Nasty to form electro-punk crossover Le Damn Dog, before coming to the UK. He blew Alex and HFB co-conspirator Dom Beken away with his superlative cool-but-deadly freestyling when I brought him to the studio to feature on 2009's 'Hell Fire And Brimstone' album and birth the Years Of The Canine project with Dom (who now plays in Nick Mason's Saucerful of Secrets).

Now happily settled in Nebraska with his wife Carrie, Dynamax has deployed advanced technology and a lot of dedication to create his most personal statement to date.

Layering dreamy textures, rock and soul flourishes and echoes of hip hop's six-decade legacy over tough beats, his rhyming and vocals are joined by an array of guests including Wu-Tang Clan's Cappadonna on 'The Resurrected Angel 7' and Young Dirty Bastard on 'Lit', Faithless singer LSK and Stix Bones on the 1980s-Giorgio-Moroder-recalling 'Welcome To Insanity', and Atlanta rapper Bone Crusher on 'Family'. Gorgeous quiet storm flavours garnish 'Heaven Sent', which he has dedicated to Carrie and features HellzFlame and LaGhe. All he needs now is a record company to give his labour-of-love electronic masterpiece the multi-format release it deserves.

As Nina and I prepare to launch our regular podcasts, we're looking forward to welcoming the mighty Dynamax to paradise – Dorset-style.

Tone Science

Tone Science Live
Capstone Theatre, Liverpool
April 22nd 2023

An evening of modular synthesiser electronic music featuring

# Scanner // Ian Boddy
# Polypores // Nigel Mullaney //
# Field Lines Cartographer

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## THE BIZZ KNEES

### Tome charts rise of pioneering 80s imprint

Top of this month's reading list is 'Conform To Deform', a new book charting the history of far-reaching indie label Some Bizzare. Having helped launch the careers of Depeche Mode, Blancmange and Soft Cell, and later counting Cabaret Voltaire, Einstürzende Neubauten and Coil among its roster, music journo Wesley Doyle tells the "bizzare" tale through thrilling prose.

The book reveals Stevo Pearce, who founded the label in 1981, to be a genuine industry maverick, boasting unorthodox business practices (he signed The The's 1983 album 'Soul Mining' to *three* different labels) and madcap behaviour (the label offices featured a chapel with confessional booth where new acts would hand over demo tapes). Published this month by Jawbone Press, bag your copy now for £14. **jawbonepress.com**

## BLOCK PARTY

### Say hello to a Scandi wall of sound

The Monolith is a new £1,290 beast of a speaker, courtesy of Swedish audiophile company Nocs. Though it doesn't come with prehistoric humans jumping around and smashing up piles of bones, it could have that effect if used in the right situation.

That's because its packed to its subwoofers with modern tech (a five-way driver array, we'll have you know). Designed by revered high-end Danish speaker manufacturers Scan-Speak, each unit is wrought from birch plywood and boasts a unique grain, finished with four layers of oil and wax. But the innovations don't stop there. The Monolith also has a new piezo vent design – invented in-house and inspired by a car exhaust – to give the speaker less distortion and deeper bass. In other words, more oomph. Start your engines. **nocsdesign.com**

# UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Aquascapes, best mates and horror films of a certain age – Junior Boys' **Jeremy Greenspan** reveals his foremost influences

**INTERVIEW: ROBERT HARRIS**

### GREEN STATE

"The Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton, Ontario is more than just gardens. It's a conservation authority that manages a huge amount of natural land in the area where I live. I use the gardens almost daily. I also live very close to the Bruce Trail which runs along the Niagara Escapement. The hiking trails and gardens in Hamilton are an essential part of why I live here. My mom is an avid gardener and nature enthusiast, and it was a big part of my life growing up, but during Covid it really became essential to my creativity.

"I draw a lot of inspiration from my city – from its industrial core, and more and more from the natural beauty of its protected green spaces. There's a place called Cootes Paradise where I learned how to kayak – it has inlets and little streams that run near old roads, so as you penetrate further into the area it starts looking post-apocalyptic because of the disused bridges and concrete overgrown with vegetation. I sometimes feel like I'm in Ballard's amazing novel 'The Drowned World'. I can't imagine life anywhere else."

### THE YAMAHA DX7

"I first got a DX7 many years ago, but it was a bit perplexing. I had a lot of experience programming subtractive synthesisers – the subtractive process is a bit like sculpting, where an artist has a piece of stone and removes elements to bring out the form. The DX7, however, is an additive synthesiser, where each frequency modulates another.

"I started getting into FM synthesis with analogue synths because I loved the metallic clanging sounds they made. The DX7 was a daunting synth to tackle – there are a lot of moving parts, and it's much harder to predict what actions are going to produce the result you want. But as I became more comfortable with it, the sounds began to resonate with me, and it has become my most used instrument. I sometimes record it coming out of a guitar amplifier now. The direct input of the DX7 is often so clean and stark that it can be jarring, but when it's amplified it becomes something totally different."

ILLUSTRATION: JOEL BENJAMIN

### THE HORROR OF IT ALL

"The 'gentlemen of horror'… I'm talking about Christopher Lee, Peter Cushing and Vincent Price. I love Hammer Horror, but in my mind I see that and the Vincent Price/Roger Corman stuff as being part of the same thing. I love the deep colours and the moody sets, the totally vague European settings and their strange opulent exoticism. Any time I see Peter Cushing on the screen I get transported.

"My favourite is the 1959 movie, 'The Hound Of The Baskervilles' because it combines so many of my favourite things – Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee, the director Terence Fisher and Sherlock Holmes. I'm a mild Sherlockian – Jeremy Brett is my favourite on-screen Sherlock, and I've read most of the books. Some of the later ones are pretty forgettable, but I've read 'The Hound Of The Baskervilles' probably more times than any other novel."

### UNDERWATER GARDENING

"During the pandemic, I liked watching 'slow television' – things like train rides or construction projects, such as people making dioramas. I love the idea of making fully realised artificial worlds in miniature.

"I got very enthusiastic about natural aquascapes – underwater gardens in a bowl – based on Diana Walstad's book, 'Ecology Of The Planted Aquarium'. I'm not very good at making the aquariums because I don't have great patience or dexterity, but it's really rewarding because you're building a living ecosystem. There are YouTube and TikTok channels run by really talented aquascapers that are fun to watch and can teach folks how to do it."

### BEST BUDDIES

"My two closest friends in the music biz are Dan Snaith and Morgan Geist. I've known Dan [Caribou, Daphni] since we were college age, but we became very close when we first toured together in the early 2000s. Dan is my most trusted musical guidance counsellor. I sent him all of the demos of the latest Junior Boys album, as I didn't really know if there was an album there. It was his encouragement and help in choosing the best songs and mixes that turned a kind of stabbing in the dark into a record that I was pleased with.

"Morgan was someone who I initially met as a fan. When I heard the debut Metro Area album, a light really went on for me. The second Junior Boys album was very much inspired by that – it was the first time I'd heard something that had a lot of that early dance music and disco spirit without sounding derivative or pastiche. I'm very close to Morgan now. We share a real love of old TV shows and comedies. I still think he's an untouchable producer and I was super-excited to play a little guitar for his latest project, Au Suisse."

### STORMIN' NORMAN

"Norman McLaren was a filmmaker, animator and musician. He was the driving force behind the National Film Board of Canada's animation studio, and he made dozens of experimental short films. The third Junior Boys album, 'Begone Dull Care', was named after one of his most famous, which he made by painting directly onto celluloid.

"For me, McLaren was the ideal artist. He was motivated by a spirit of play and innovation, and he made art because it was there to be made, not to service his ego. Inspired by technological advances, he created his own techniques as opposed to allowing technical advisers to dictate the terms.

"He was a musician as well as a filmmaker – many of his scores were produced by drawing directly into the audio track of his films, and he made elaborate programmable cards, to allow him to craft synthesised soundtracks that aligned perfectly with the visuals. His films are deeply moving – 'Pas De Deux' is perhaps the most beautiful motion picture ever made.

**Junior Boys' latest album, 'Waiting Game', is out now on City Slang**

## MUSIC FOR AIR

### Dyson unveils air-purifying cans

Sir James Dyson may be steering his home utilities empire towards the world of audio, but he's not letting go of the air-related action just yet. The striking Dyson Zone noise-cancelling headphones first revealed in March 2022, come equipped with a contact-free air purifier, which drops down in front of your mouth and uses a mesh to diffuse airflow. Nicknamed the "Bane mask" by the internet, Dyson's industrious PR team prefer the term "hygienic breathing". Hitting shelves later this year, you'll be looking at – deep breath now – £749 for a pair. **dyson.co.uk**

## FIGHT THE POWER

### Compilation released in support of Iranian women

Formed in the wake of the ongoing protests in Iran, Apranik Records is a new label aiming to amplify the voices of Iranian artists. Their first release – 'Woman, Life, Freedom' – is a brilliant compilation featuring 12 Iranian female artists, put together by electronic artists AIDA and Nesa Azadikhah, creating a stupendous album of electro, breaks, techno and ambient music.

"We release this collection in solidarity and towards a fight for a free Iran," say Apranik. "We dream of a future where women and girls can openly and safely practise, grow and shine within the arts, especially electronic music."

You can purchase the digital album for $15, with all proceeds being donated to charities that help women in Iran. **apranikrecords.bandcamp.com**

## BROTHERLY LOVE

### New flick captures the Eno brothers in Greece

You probably weren't lucky enough to see Brian and Roger Eno play their first-ever gig together at the Acropolis in Athens, back in 2021. It's therefore welcome news that the entire performance was recorded by German director Tilo Krause and is being released next month as a full feature-length film. Titled 'Live At The Acropolis', it includes a setlist with music from the Eno brothers' 2020 collaboration 'Mixing Colours', plus a few pieces from their respective solo outings. Set to premiere at a selection of UK cinemas next month, check out if 'Live At The Acropolis' will be coming to a theatre close to you. **cinemalive.com**

**PULSE**

## ALLIYAH ENYO

### Myth, femininity, and magical electronics

**WHO?**

A compelling talent, Alliyah Enyo is an Edinburgh-based multidisciplinary artist and DJ, who weaves a multitude of influences into a uniquely captivating sound. An alumnus of the Northern Ballet Company, her oblique explorations of femininity and mythology, part-inspired by her grandmother's love of folk tales and ancient stories, not only incorporate deft interpretive musicianship and compositional verve, but also draw from several disciplines, including sound installation, DJ culture, choreography, photography and sculpture.

**WHY ALLIYAH ENYO?**

Her mesmerising voice is hypnotic, but Enyo also layers loops and filters into her sound to form extraordinary, filigreed sonic worlds. Her live performances combine digital electronics and acoustic processes, creating what her label dubs "ethereal choral symphonies", while a borderless, subtly Middle-Eastern vocal-led approach and rich visual aesthetic evokes the diaphanous otherworldliness of classic 4AD acts, Dead Can Dance or This Mortal Coil.

**TELL US MORE...**

Released at the tail-end of last year, 'Visitations 03 03' is the latest in a limited edition series of recordings produced on the Hebridean Isle of Eigg, at a secluded bothy belonging to Lost Map label head Johnny Lynch, aka Pictish Trail. The two deeply meditative and emotive pieces are named after the places on the island that inspired them. Both 'Cathedral Cave' and 'The Singing Sands' are rich soundscapes with a globally informed scope. They're rewardingly transportive, melding ambient experimentalism with intercultural traditional elements and a brand of soulful psychedelic futurism. Quite the spell, these opposing forces align like celestial incantations that might easily carry us world-weary folk beyond the earthly realm.

**CARL GRIFFIN**

**'Visitations 03 03' is out now on Lost Map**

**PULSE**

## BETHAN LLOYD

Folky vocalist to power your pagan rituals

### WHO?

Harnessing her voice for seemingly endless possibilities, Welsh artist Bethan Lloyd uses native and global folk vocal traditions to create tribal rhythms, rave-inspired production and harmonic layering. Sounds intense – and it is – but at the heart of the music are Lloyd's own vocals, which can at times be trance-inducing. Drip-feeding us tracks since 2016, the start of 2023 has seen releases come thick and fast. Her current single,'No Umbilical', will be followed by another in March, while her debut album, 'Metamorphosis', is due to arrive in April via Berlin label Soulpunx.

### WHY BETHAN LLOYD?

Lloyd's journey is fascinating. It includes training as a classical singer, immersing herself in Berlin's experimental scene and learning from magicians about ancient teachings of the natural world. Music for Lloyd presents a chance to connect with the environment around us, both past and present, and she has recorded at Neolithic sites and places of natural beauty. This approach is audible on her debut album, 'Metamorphosis', which pits a playful, gritty and danceable patchwork of ideas around her manipulated voice. There's an innate ancientness to each track, augmented by wholly contrasting modern technology, like the 80s synth vibes of 'No Umblical' or the Enya-meets-dubstep-meets-techno soundscape that is 'Aria' (yes, it is *that* good).

### TELL US MORE...

And there's even more depth to Lloyd's creativity, whether as a collaborator in drone-choir NYX (who recently worked with Gazelle Twin), Jet Pack Dog (with Isaac Ray who joins her on production duties on 'Metamorphosis'), leading voice retreat workshops ("vocal liberation and improvisation" is an upcoming one) or performing in inspiring places, such as on top of Mynydd Parys mountain in Wales under starlight.

**JAMES THORNHILL**

**'No Umbilical' is out now on Soulpunx. 'Metamorphosis' follows on 7 April**

## ENIGMAS

Sweeping the forgotten corridors of sound, **Scott Blixen** sets his sights on **Soupir**

How could you not love this bunch of starship troopers? Anyone brave enough to sport facial hair *and* make-up will always tickle my fancy. High camp, high jinks aside, chasing the mayfly existence of the Québécois synthpop trio Soupir leads us down some unfamiliar avenues.

In 1983, these French-Canadian futurists topped the charts on their own turf but had vapourised before the year was out. Their single 'Métal' is a delight for seekers of overlooked electropop and relays the plight of a lovelorn robot which, in its distress, cries metallic tears. It's an insistent blend of rock riffage and synths, with a vocoder hook that hits all major pleasure centres.

In late 1982, Normand Brathwaite – TV personality and Soupir chanteur – shoehorned a performance of the song onto 'Pop Citrouille', the music show he hosted. This act of cheeky self-promotion saw the track race up the charts and kickstart an explosion of electropop in French-speaking Canada. If your interest is piqued, check out the 'Québectronique 80' compilation. I must confess, I've fallen in love with its trashy charm.

Hot on the heels of their hit, Soupir released their LP, 'Éclipse'. Its mix of synthesised rock and funky electric boogaloo is currently blitzing my winter blues. If Telex had hired Bill Nelson and Nile Rodgers, they may have approached the territory this album inhabits.

The maestro behind Soupir's music was Marie Bernard, whose far-reaching career deserves a sizeable article of its own. She began recording in the 1970s as the driving force of Et Cetera, a prog group with all the baroque flourishes you'd expect of Gentle Giant or Yes.

Her reputation blossomed throughout the 1980s and 90s, with many commissions for film and television. She also composed choral work, including '8 Haïkus', an experimental piece for three ondes Martenots and a large choir.

She'd been seduced by the siren call of the ondes Martenot while studying piano at the Conservatoire de Musique à Montréal and became a lifelong devotee. Her 2003 album, 'Ondes À L'Âme', is a testament to the spiritual potential of the French proto-synth and was inspired by her work in healing and meditation.

It's to our collective shame that francophone culture faces dumb prejudice on these shores. By admitting Marie Bernard to the recognised pantheon of female pathfinders, in some small measure, we'll have righted a wrong. As well as deserving a place on your electropop playlist, Soupir's solitary hit opens doors to a spectrum of music that failed to register on the British radar.

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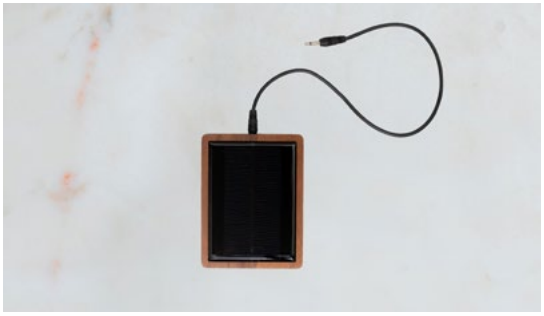
## LIGHT NOISE

### Imprint releases solar-powered gadget

Pan-European label 99Chants has always said it would be a finite operation, promising to "complete" with its 99th release. But this innovative indie has surprised us yet again with the Aurōra, a solar-powered sound and control voltage generator that plugs into your modular synthesiser via its jack cable, allowing for light-based modulation. Alternatively, you can plug it straight into your speakers for a less directed, more experimental approach, what 99C likes to call "a sonic representation of the pure voltage of light". Mounted on a lovely wooden panel, complete with a laser-cut 99C insignia, Aurōra is all yours for a reasonable €108. **99chants.com**



## A STONE'S THROW

### Jack Dangers auctions off own body parts

To celebrate his 40th year in music, Jack Dangers has gone and put together a rather unique product in 'Lucky Bag' – if you can call kidney stones a product, that is. The special album features 12 unreleased tracks written between 1982 and 2022, a collection of limited-edition polaroid pictures, and yes, a bag of his own k-stones. We'll let him do the talking.

"I wanted to include an actual part of me with these acutely personal recordings spanning 40 years," he says. "The quarry was mined and the aggregate will now be made available…"

Righto. We did warn you his name was Jack Dangers. Our only remaining question is what will he write on his tax return? Yours for $95 (or just get the regular old double CD for $35). **meatbeatmanifesto.bandcamp.com**

# TIME MACHINE

For a few years during the 1990s, **David Bowie** was the Jeremy Paxman of art critics, compelling the rich and famous to justify their exhibition catalogue waffle

**WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN**

When David Bowie released 'Earthling' in 1997, critics chastised him for following trends rather than inspiring them. His 21st studio album, which featured drum 'n' bass and electronic music, led The Philadelphia Inquirer to accuse him of "jumping on bandwagons", while UK music monthly Select was even more excoriating.

Musically, Bowie might have led the way in the 1970s, but he was always a cultural sponge, continually absorbing other people's ideas. After an artistically uneven period in the 80s, Bowie began learning from masters old and new again when, in the 90s, he joined the editorial board of Modern Painters magazine alongside serious art writers like Martin Gayford and the novelist William Boyd.

Elsewhere that decade, Bowie was sucking up inspiration from David Lynch, who directed him in 'Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me' in 1992, while Nine Inch Nails, Goldie and Underworld were just some of the artists who provided musical stimulus.

He became a critic himself when he accidentally landed a scoop with the enigmatic Polish-French artist Balthus, who happened to be his neighbour in Switzerland. The autumn 1994 issue of Modern Painters carried a 20-page feature by the Thin White Duke and the even thinner Balthus, titled 'The Last Legendary Painter'.

After the success of his Balthus piece, Bowie went on to interview other artists for the journal, including Tracey Emin, Julian Schnabel and Jeff Koons. Those 1990s magazine articles, where he's asking the questions rather than answering them, perhaps reveal more about the man than any of his interviews as a musician, where he would launch a charm offensive against the interviewer while being deliberately vague with his responses.

There was no such equivocation as a writer. In an interview with Koons in New York in 1998, picking up on something the artist had said nine years

'BEAUTIFUL, HALLO, SPACE-BOY PAINTING,' A COLLABORATION BETWEEN DAMIEN HIRST AND DAVID BOWIE - PHOTO: REUTERS/HANNAH MCKAY

earlier about his aim to "lead the bourgeois into a state of entropy", Bowie simply asked, "What the fuck does that mean, Jeffrey?"

Stunned, Koons gave a rambling answer about trying to "disarm people" which he concluded by saying, "Sorry, I'm not doing well there as far as verbalising that".

And then there was enfant terrible Damien Hirst – the Young British Artist (YBA) prone to carving up 300-pound tiger sharks and preserving them in formaldehyde for eternity (or at least until they leaked at a later date). This provocative piece, 'The Physical Impossibility Of Death In The Mind Of Someone Living', impressed Bowie, as did the controversial artist's other work.

Hirst had his detractors, but Bowie was a strong advocate of his oeuvre. While many artists were glib and ironic where death was concerned, Hirst was prepared to stare it in the face. Bowie interviewed him for Modern Painters in 1996, contemplating "life, death and everything".

But it wasn't all grappling with big questions. Bowie and Hirst had fun. Having seen some of the colourful exhibits Hirst's spin machine could make at the artist's 'No Sense Of Absolute Corruption' show at New York's Gagosian Gallery that same year, he decided he wanted to have a go himself.

Hirst's inspiration for the device – which revolved so you could splatter paint onto it – had come from watching John Noakes make a rudimentary picture with something similar on 'Blue Peter' when he was nine years old.

"I love making spin paintings with kids," said Hirst, writing for Sotheby's auction house after Bowie's death. "I've got a spin machine that I take to my kids' school and get all the kids doing them. The joy of making them is what somehow makes them great art. All those crazy moments throwing paint around and mostly not knowing what you're doing is distilled in the final result, and that's why they're so amazing."

Hirst later collaborated on spin artworks with The Flaming Lips' Wayne Coyne, and Ed Sheeran used it to design the cover of 'Divide', but David Bowie was the first rock star to approach the wheel with zeal.

"David was like a child," enthused Hirst. "You have to live in the moment and give up all your preconceptions. Let yourself go, just have fun and let the universe do its thing. He was brilliant fun to spin with."

Ever dapper, Bowie wore an expensive suit to the studio, which got ruined.

"He said he didn't have any old clothes but didn't mind getting paint on the new shit he was wearing," recalled Hirst. "I loved that!"

His pricey watch went on the wheel too, and was flung off and smashed.

"He never even picked it up," said Hirst, gleefully.

One of the pieces Bowie and Hirst collaborated on, 'Beautiful, Hallo, Space-Boy Painting', sold for a not inconsiderable £785,000 when the singer's possessions went under the hammer at Sotheby's in 2016. It's likely John Noakes went to his grave the following year never knowing that he'd indirectly inspired the man behind Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane to make an artwork that fetched the best part of a million quid.

Bowie exhibited some of his other art for War Child in 1994 in response to an appeal from Brian Eno, with proceeds from the sale going to a children's therapy centre in Sarajevo. Other artists who donated their own personal works included Paul McCartney and Pete Townshend.

"I think it's all exceptionally good – exceptionally surprising," said Bowie, diplomatically, when interviewed by ITV News. "Some of it I don't rate very much, but then some of it is really better than a lot of graduation pieces that I've seen at art schools."

**The 50th anniversary reissue of David Bowie's 'Aladdin Sane' is released by Parlophone on 14 April**

# LANDMARKS

Fred Deakin remembers the making of the infectious and influential **Lemon Jelly** cut 'The Staunton Lick', from 1999's 'The Yellow EP'

**INTERVIEW: ROBERT HARRIS**

"Nick Franglen and I both grew up in north London, around Kentish Town. We didn't really know each other, but we had mutual friends and he once took my sister out. As teenagers we'd both been in a few bands, and we were also big fans of 23 Skidoo who were local heroes. I'd bump into Nick at their gigs. As well as playing in bands, I'd also started DJing – bottom of the bill at this stage – at places like Diorama in Kings Cross, Sol Y Sombra in Soho, and the hip hop club, Titanic.

"In 1984 I moved to Edinburgh to study, and while I was there the DJing progressed into promoting my own club nights. I still think of myself primarily as a DJ. After a couple of years I organised these events called Thunderball. We used unusual venues like art galleries, casinos and ice rinks, and the music was a total mix. Eclectic is an overused word these days, but I was playing soul and funk along with more curveball tracks like heavy metal and country & western. Trying to break down barriers.

"In 1994, I applied to study graphic design at St Martin's and moved back to London. My interview portfolio was a bunch of club flyers that I'd designed and a fanzine. I didn't even have an art O-Level, but they gave me a shot. I'd been messing about with music and samples. I'm a big hip hop fan, and was in awe of people like A Tribe Called Quest. I was thinking that if I got a record out, it might give my DJ career a bit more oomph, but I wasn't really getting anywhere. Then a friend suggested I give Nick a buzz.

"While I'd been away, Nick had moved into music production. He had his own studio and had worked with people like Pulp, Primal Scream, Blur and Hole. I studied cello at school, but Nick really understands music – he can pick up any instrument and play it almost immediately. Lemon Jelly was the classic DJ-and-producer duo, at least initially. I'd basically come in with a sack of samples and together we developed ideas and tracks.

"I'd worked with typography legend Ian Swift – aka Swifty – for two-and-a-half years, and was very excited about designing our sleeves. They were so elaborate that there was no way it was going to be a money-making exercise. We just wanted to put something out there that was as perfect as we could make it with the resources we had – something we could be totally proud of. I do think that the artwork helped us to stand out, and it intrigued people at magazines enough for them to give the promos a listen. This strong visual identity was one of the things that made Lemon Jelly unique.

"We were incredibly lucky with our early records. We had a great PR company called Zzonked, and my sister also happened to be working with John Peel, who was the first person anywhere to play our debut EP. Apparently, Gilles Peterson was in the next studio and rushed in to find out what it was.

"The sound sources we were using came from car boot sales and charity shops. Not so much library music, more random 50p purchases – we sampled Nana Mouskouri on our first album. I'd run easy listening nights in Edinburgh, and in London I knew DJs like the Karminskys and Martin Green from the clubs Blow Up and The Sound Gallery. That vibe definitely permeated the Lemon Jelly stuff.

"'The Staunton Lick' evolved from two samples taken from John Pearse's record, 'Teach Yourself Folk Guitar'. The copy that I have used to be my dad's. It's completely knackered now, because I'd take it out on tours and scratch with it. Ironically, I don't think either of the riffs on the song is actually 'The Staunton Lick'. The bassline is 'inspired' by a Leonard Cohen thing in 3/4 time. We changed it to 4/4. We'd later learn the hard way about samples, when Herb Alpert's wife Lani Hall took us to the cleaners and won 100 per cent of the publishing.

"To start with, we weren't convinced by the track because all we had was a groove. The spoken sample was the real breakthrough. I said, 'What if this is the whole record? That it's not about the riffs, but about the guy *talking* about the riffs?'. Then the tempo changes, the slow lead in – and slow finish – gave the piece a beginning, middle and end.

"A lot of our music wound up on television. This was all part of the blanket agreement… I mean, there'd be a home improvement show and 'In The Bath' would be playing. Then Edgar Wright reached out to us and came round to the studio. Edgar is a lovely, enthusiastic and generous bloke. I think he was just a fan. He took 'The Staunton Lick' and used it for the very last scene in the final episode of his hit sitcom, 'Spaced'.

"It's funny how big a moment in 1990s TV that was. After that happened, Radio 1 approached our management and said, 'We'll A-list this track if you put it back out as a single'. But both me and Nick went, 'Nah'. It seemed a bit desperate.

"The original EP goes for silly money now. I have other favourites from our back catalogue, like 'Ramblin' Man' and 'Come', but 'The Staunton Lick' seems to resonate with people of a certain generation, and that's probably down to that last episode of 'Spaced'.

"When we played live, 'The Staunton Lick' was always our final number. I've obviously got a big sentimental attachment to it, because I can remember my dad playing along to the John Pearse record when I was a little boy. My sister and I would be running around at bath time, and dad would start slowly, then get faster and faster. That's probably where the idea came from."

**Fred Deakin's science fiction concept album, 'The Lasters', is out now via Bandcamp**

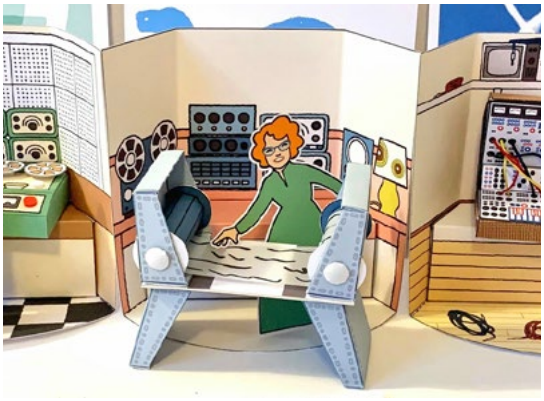
## PICTURE PERFECT

### Pop-up art for knob twiddlers

Sean Bright, founder of pop-up art shop Hey Kids Rock'n'Roll, says his entire business started with Delia Derbyshire.

"A friend of mine suggested I could make some music-related art to bring to a craft market she was organising," he divulges. "Being eager for any sort of income at the time, I agreed!

"I was casting around for ideas and the famous image of Delia Derbyshire popped into my head. I always loved the visual of those big old machines combined with her modish style. It might not have been the most *commercially* obvious subject, but people seemed to like it… it has subsequently taken over my life!" Bright has since gone on to cover other musical greats from Daphne Oram to Suzanne Ciani, and a little Alice Coltrane made from felt. Get yours now. **instagram.com/heykidsrocknroll**



## BEAT THE GAME

### Become a global music industry influencer

Ever dreamed of running your own club? We have the next best thing. 'Business Techno' is a new six-player board game based around growing your own techno empire, trading assets and property, boosting followers and expanding your cultural reach.

But there's a serious note to all this, too, as the game's Polish developers want to start a conversation around the current state of the techno industry – you know, soulless capitalists destroying the essence of dance music. If you fancy your chances at becoming the greatest hashtag techno influencer, it'll cost you €42.34 (about £40). **businesstechno.pl**

## BOX FRESH

### Studio-ready cardboard controller

Who wants a do-it-yerself music-making kit that doesn't require breaking out the soldering iron? Look no further than Rhythmo's BeatBox, a MIDI controller and drum machine made almost entirely out of cardboard. Each $159.99 pack includes the chassis, 24 buttons, a joystick, 360-degree knobs, plus an onboard amplifier and speakers. There's also a mobile app that comes preloaded with sound packs and tutorials. Taking just one hour to construct, all told it's one of the most impressive DIY kits on the market. **rhythmo.io**

## GRAND DESIGN

### Futuristic piano released for Roland anniversary

To mark their fifth decade in production, Roland have unveiled the 50th Anniversary Concept Piano. Pitched as "the company's vision for an upright grand of the future", the prototype comes equipped with 360-degree speakers, and, would you believe, a pair of drone speakers.

"Rather than simply adding reverb to the audio, Takahiro Murai and his team wanted the sound to actually fall from the air around the player," explain Roland. One problem they encountered was noisy drone propellers, but the company hope that developing technology can fix this in the coming years. Though not for sale, it is currently on show in Las Vegas. **roland.com**

## ROUGH AND READY

### Label's book arm celebrates fifth birthday in style

Rough Trade Books has been in operation for five years, proving itself to be a vital cog in the new wave of outsider publishing. To mark this milestone, the publishing house has announced a stellar schedule for the year ahead, with a book from counterculture icon Leslie Winer due in June, and an expanded edition of Sophy Hollington and David Keenan's incredible 'Autonomic' tarot deck being prepared for August. Then in September, expect a reprint of 'In Loving Memory Of Work', Craig Oldham's story of the UK miners strike of 1984-85, told through the visual culture of working-class communities. But if you want something through the post this month, then get your mitts on the new series of RTB's 'Pamphlet Series', which this time around sees John Grant discussing his lifelong fascination with languages.
**roughtradebooks.com**

## SPEAK EASY

What happens when you pit electrifying synths against the dulcet tones of a County Durham native? On 'Sun Moon Town', ex-Ride man **Steve Queralt** drafts in writer **Michael Smith** to find out

**WORDS: MAT SMITH**

Steve Queralt, the bassist from Ride, began writing instrumental music when his band reformed back in 2014.

"I got into making home demos, always with the intention of writing for Ride," he says. "Along the way, you end up accumulating all these weird soundscapes and bits of noodly synth nonsense."

It's those more experimental offcuts that form the basis of 'Sun Moon Town', a 12-inch collaboration with Hartlepool writer, poet and filmmaker, Michael Smith.

Released towards the end of last year on Bytes, the label home of fellow Ride man Andy Bell's GLOK guise, the idea for the partnership came after Queralt realised he was accumulating enough of these "noodly" demos to contemplate putting together a full album, as he explored an approach he calls an "unintentional prog rock" path.

"They start softly, they build up when the drums come in, in the middle, and then it fades away and calms down again," he says. "I don't set out to do it that way, it just seems to be the arrangement I usually end up with."

Feeling that his tracks needed more of an anchor, Queralt sent his demos to a few friends, asking for ideas on who he could bring in as a vocalist.

"I don't sing and I don't write lyrics – or rather, I do both, but really, really badly," he laughs.

Throwing him a curveball, the label suggested writer Michael Smith as a potential good fit, on the strength of Smith's previous spoken word contributions for Andrew Weatherall's 'Unreal City' project for Faber Books, which was released in 2013.

"That sounded interesting to me, so I sent him over the music for what became 'Vespertina', the first track on the EP," remembers Queralt. "I was a little bit terrified that he would just laugh at it, but instead he immediately sent me back an idea he had, and it seemed to work perfectly."

"It blew me away when he sent me it," gushes Smith. "It fitted my mood perfectly. I remember my seaside flat in St Leonards was bathed in the most gorgeous sunsets for a couple of weeks, and I just had it on repeat. I couldn't get enough of it. I must have done my family's heads in."

In an effort to make four tracks ("Four tracks equals an EP, or at least it does in Ride's world," says Queralt), he mined his hard drive for other sounds that might inspire Smith. 'Chaldean Oracle' and 'Glitches' were delivered quickly, while the EP's final track, 'In A Wonderland' – inspired by the writings of Lewis Carroll – represents the only time there was a more lengthy back-and-forth between the pair.

"With all four tracks, Steve sent over some music first, and then I waited to see what they stirred lyrically," says Smith. "I was working on a book at the time, but it was still in very fragmentary form – just notes and lines and images here and there. Steve's music acted as a frame to help me pull the material together into some kind of shape. The tracks and book fed off each other, giving each one a bit of form. Creatively, it was an interesting process."

Queralt's only concern with the project was that people wouldn't want to listen to the tracks repeatedly.

"There's a track by The Velvet Underground called 'The Gift', which is the story of someone sending himself through the post. I said to Michael that was the style we needed – something with substance to it, so that you would want to listen to it again."

Play 'Sun Moon Town', and its clear that Queralt's fears about it would probably never have come true. On the one hand, you have his undulating, ever-shifting musical backdrops, each of which is filled with the gradual builds and neo-prog unpredictability that he's drawn to. And on the other, you have Smith's engaging, enveloping narratives – part-story, part-diaristic recollection, part-dreamy stream-of-consciousness beat poetry.

"One of the things I found most satisfying about this EP was that every track Steve sent had a very different feel," offers Smith. "Which means the results have quite a broad emotional palette. If 'Vespertina' was all sweetness and light, by the time he sent me 'Chaldean Oracle', the second winter lockdown had dug its heels in and the mood had darkened considerably. I thought 'In A Wonderland' had the strangest feel to it, like some half-forgotten dream, or something on the threshold."

'Glitches' is perhaps the EP's most emblematic moment, detailing a visit that Smith took to a London he no longer recognised, with clusters of shiny glass boxes replacing the low buildings he was once familiar with. It's no surprise that the track is delivered in a detached and dejected tone.

"He found it slightly disturbing how much London had changed," says Queralt. "It all looks very impressive, but it's all quite meaningless at the same time. There's no character or depth."

A remix EP of 'Sun Moon Town' follows later this year, with re-rubs by GLOK, Flug 8, Nina Walsh and more, but Queralt still has his sights set on an album which, like this debut EP, will be mixed by Matthew Simms from Wire.

"I'm very happy with the backing tracks and what Matt's done with them," he says. "My vision for it is half-instrumental, half-vocal, and working with a number of singers to bring it all together. It's been three or four years in the making, and I'm really pleased with how it's developing."

**'Sun Moon Town' is out now on Bytes. The remix album is set to follow later this year**

## CARD COUNTING

### Synth card game ahoy

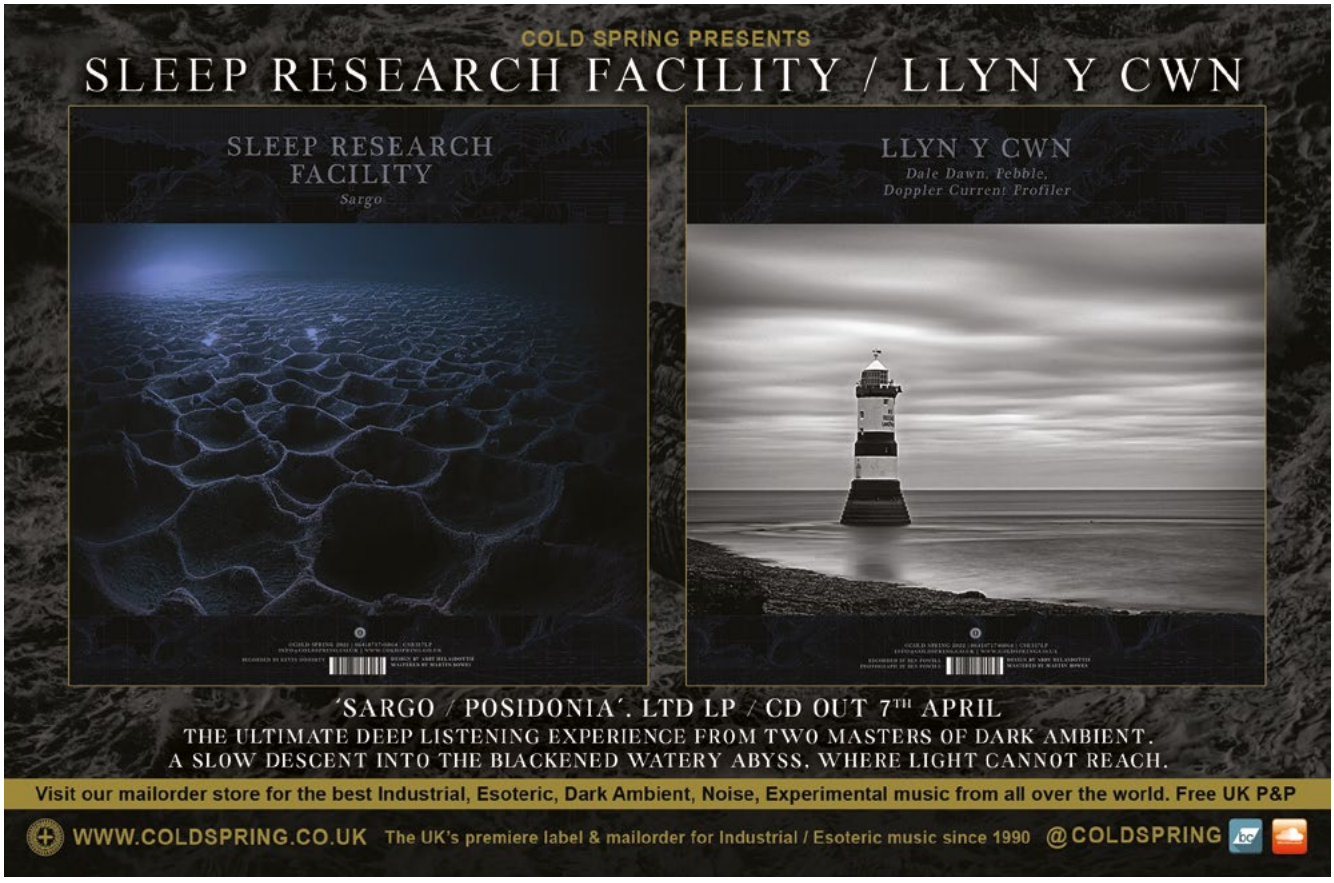
Open thy wallets for Vintage Synth Trumps 2, the card game which sees iconic analogue machines do battle. Produced in-house by GForce Software, company co-founder Dave Spiers says demand took them by surprise.

"We did an original Vintage Synth Trumps pack back in the early 2000s, and those became real collectors items in subsequent years," he explains.

"As our collection of the original instruments grew, and our stock of the original Trumps diminished, we decided to do an updated set in 2016.

"They've been very successful for us – not necessarily in terms of financial return – but more in feeding the obsessives and nurturing new ones."

If you fit within that category, you can now order a pack direct from our website for just £7.99.
**electronicsound.co.uk/shop**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## I SHALL SING UNTIL MY LAND IS FREE

Ukrainian producer **Kateryna Zavoloka** reveals the ongoing shifts that have occurred in her creative practice since her world turned upside down with the invasion of her home country

**WORDS: PAUL CLARKE**

"I have it written down in my notebook on 21 February 2021 – 'Must finish new album'," remembers Kyiv artist Kateryna Zavoloka.

Three days after that, the Russian army invaded Ukraine, and Zavoloka's life and music took a sudden and cruel change of direction. Watching footage of the war from her home in Berlin, she had more urgent concerns than music, such as for her parents, who were trapped in an occupied village.

"They eventually managed to sneak away past the Russian tanks, but their house and car were shelled," she confides.

Zavoloka immediately started volunteering with a number of charity projects in support of her besieged home country, and was forced to accept that finishing 'Amulet', her eighth solo album, would have to wait.

"Three months later, I was in this kind of post-traumatic stress disorder mood," she elaborates. "I thought, 'I have to create something, otherwise I'll just go mad'. But I felt that the message of the album should be different to how it was initially. So little by little, I started to go back and add traditional Ukrainian instruments to existing tracks."

Building on the intricate and abrasive rhythmic soundscapes she had crafted on previous albums – see 2018's 'Promeni', for example – Zavoloka set about furnishing her music with folk instrumentation, like the sopilka flute, performed and recorded in Kyiv by her friend Nata Zhyzhchenko (from Ukranian electro-folk collective, Onuka), and the kobza (a lute-like stringed instrument), played by Zavoloka's partner, Dmytro Fedorenko.

This adjustment of the creative process has led to an album which is both a serious political and artistic statement of intent – a defiant rallying cry – and a breaking of fresh musical ground, where the human feeling of live musicians stands in stark contrast to the relentless industrial noise and at times militaristic beats.

"An amulet is a kind of talisman that you use to protect yourself from negativity," she explains. "We had so much pain, hatred and emotional anxiety, this spectrum of negative emotions that we needed to deal with in order to stay sane, and how to still feel human, despite all the pain you've experienced.

"So for myself and other Ukrainians, I wanted to write music so emotional it could heal, transforming pain into gratitude, or hatred into power. How do you make something emotional? You use instruments! That's why I used traditional Ukrainian instruments, because they're part of our land."

In that sense, 'Amulet' has clear distinctions with Zavoloka's most overtly political work 'Volya', her album from 2014 that was inspired by the Maidan revolution which ousted Ukraine's pro-Moscow leader Viktor Yanukovych.

"On 'Volya', I used the sounds I recorded, like the beats that people were beating on the buses. But with 'Amulet', I was composing with traditional instruments, so the approach was different."

Still, while the styles and subject matter might vary, every Zavoloka record is based on a specific concept, be it the four ancient elements on her 'Universe Elements' EPs, or the notion of "sonic embroidery" behind 2020's 'Ornament' album.

"It's important for any artist to have a message," says Zavoloka. "I think artists are the most sensitive people when it comes to perceiving the world. I know some artists make music as just an emotional flow, but I have to include something that disturbs or interests me."

She is sending more than just a message to her native land, though. In the wake of the Russian invasion, Zavoloka and Fedorenko (who she makes music as Cluster Lizard and runs the Prostir label with) set up I Shall Sing Until My Land Is Free, a politically charged label releasing music from a broad pool of artists, with all profits going to humanitarian organisations working in Ukraine.

"At the beginning of the invasion, we were doing so many different charity projects, like contributing to compilations or playing concerts for free," she explains. "Then our friend asked us if we wanted to release a Merzbow album to raise funds. Prostir is just for our own music, so we decided to set up a new label. We called it I Shall Sing Until My Land Is Free because that's the name of a Muslimgauze track, and also because our musician friends in Ukraine, who are on the front line, took some instruments with them to the trenches and are singing while the war is going on.

"Our first release was 'Chechnya Over Dub' by Muslimgauze, and since then we've had nine releases, so it's moving very fast! It's become a community of artists."

Zavoloka believes community and solidarity to be among the most powerful weapons in her country's struggle. When asked if she has any final thoughts about our conversation, she replies matter-of-factly:

"Thank you to all the people who are helping Ukraine now. I hope that together we can all defeat the darkness."

**'Amulet' is out now on Prostir**

**PULSE**

## VAGRANT LOVERS

Peckham electro/post-punk duo

### WHO?

Vagrant Lovers are singer, writer and "cultural beacon" Kirsty Allison – the band's name is taken from one of her poems – and musician/filmmaker Gil De Ray. They started out as a spoken word outfit, with De Ray providing ambient backing tracks. "We were trying to incorporate a literary aesthetic with music… the beat poets of tomorrow," says Allison. "As we play more gigs, it becomes more energetic, musical and performance-based – kind of 'lit-tronica' swamp-dub disco."

### WHY VAGRANT LOVERS?

Debut single 'Paradise Burns' – released in September last year – has Allison melting "in the heat of a burning Garden Of Eden", drawling "It's so hot, it's so hot, it's so goddamn hot" like a delirious Eve lost to the dark side, as wisps of analogue synth and lo-fi percussion swirl around her. Influences span far and wide. "We're the result of our deviant tastes, growing up in nightclubs and libraries," she says. "Gil listens to experimental ambient music, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff and Sun Ra. I grew up DJing with Irvine Welsh, so electronica and the spirit of disco and acid house are ingrained. We love The Stooges, Suicide, PiL, the Velvets, The Jesus And Mary Chain, Spacemen 3, The Modern Lovers, Alice Coltrane and Ludovico Einaudi. The words and style of beat poets are our heartline." There's an album in the offing too, currently being recorded with Snapped Ankles' Chestnutt.

### TELL US MORE...

The cerebral force is strong here. The editor of literary/arts quarterly Ambit and founder of cultural mag Cold Lips, Allison has also been described as "the modern Patti Smith". "We are writing all the time, chanting into the apocalypse," she says. "I use literature to call out what needs to be said. There's a savage beauty to life, and great music is about capturing that or escaping from it."

**VELIMIR ILIC**

**'Paradise Burns' is out now on Blang**

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## SCHOOL OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Resident archivist **Jack Dangers** considers a seven-inch single from 1970 made with an extraordinary Finnish synthesiser

'DIMI 1' is a seven-inch single by Erkki Kurenniemi and Jukka Ruohomäki. The sleeve is paper, with artwork featuring flying cows in a starry sky, a naked woman and the words "DIMI is born" – it's very 1970. The idea seems to be to mark the birth of the DIMI, or the Digital Musical Instrument – reputedly the first Finnish synthesiser completed by Erkki Kurenniemi.

One of Finland's most celebrated pioneers of electronic music, Kurenniemi was a composer, instrument designer, avant-garde filmmaker and futurologist, and he built Finland's first electronic music studio in the early 1960s.

While he was building the studio, he also made electronic instruments for well-known composers like Ralph Lundsten, and in 1970 Digelius Electronics Finland Oy was set up to make the DIMI synthesiser. It combined a sequencer with a synthesiser, and one of the many aspects Kurenniemi was interested in exploring was how fast it could spit out notes. There's a short YouTube documentary, 'Hardcore Techno's Alternative History – Case: Dance Of The Anthropoids – Electric Byway', which claims that Kurenniemi may have provided the original influence for speedcore.

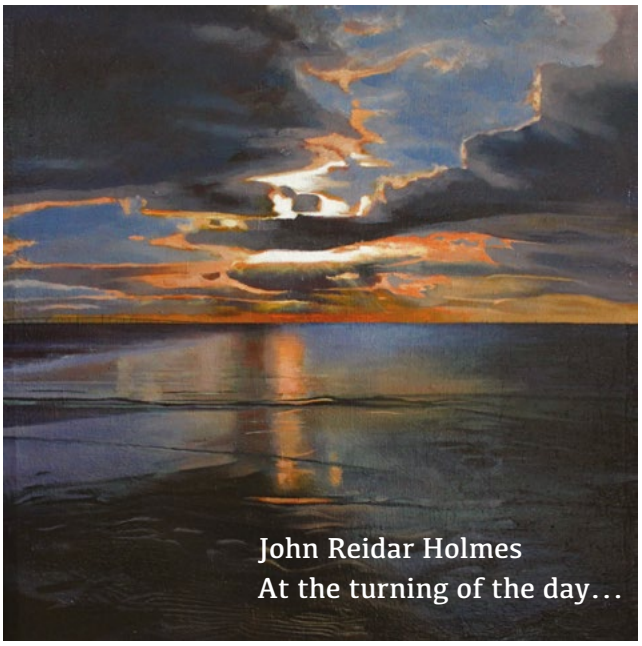
His composition 'Antropoidien Tanssi' ('Dance Of The Anthropoids') on the compilation album 'Perspectives '68 – Music In Finland', released on Love Records that year, is pretty incredible and sounds really contemporary over 50 years later. A copy of that album is currently on Discogs, with an asking price of nearly £600.

Don't worry, though. The same track features on a 2012 double vinyl compilation of Kurenniemi's work called 'Rules' alongside one of the tracks from the 'DIMI 1' seven-inch, and that's much more affordable. So too is the 2002 CD compilation 'Äänityksiä / Recordings 1963-1973'. There are two tracks on that called 'Sähkösoittimen Ääniä #4' and 'Sähkösoittimen Ääniä #1', which are also amazing.

Other DIMI models were produced. The DIMI-O was based on an optical interface and worked like a modern DAW with a rudimentary scrolling timeline. It could also be played using a video camera, which triggered the synth by using movement. There's a demonstration of that with a dancer on YouTube. Then in 1972 came the DIMI-S (aka Sexophone) where the synth was triggered by the electric conductivity of skin, and the DIMI-T (aka Electroencephalophone), arrived the following year – that version was controlled by brain waves.

I got my copy of 'DIMI 1' on Discogs for around £30 from a guy in Finland. I think he must have found a whole box of unsold stock, because it's in mint condition and he keeps selling them.

Erkki Kurenniemi was revered in his home country and was awarded the Order Of The Lion Of Finland by the president in 2011. He died in 2017 aged 75.

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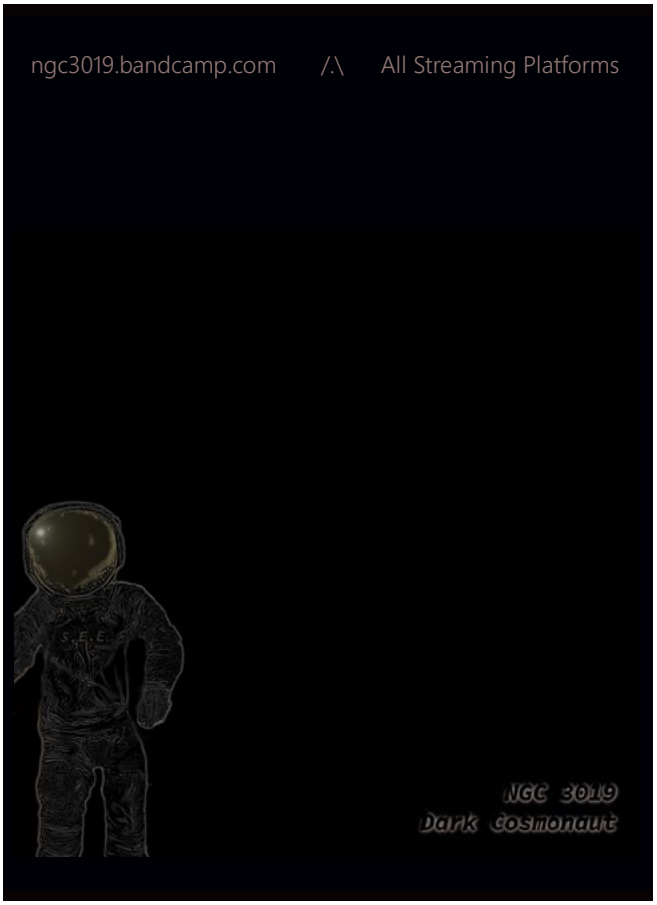

## THE REEL DEAL

### Company hits rewind on cassettes

Last year, sales of cassette tapes in the UK reached their highest level for two decades. But how many of us actually still own a cassette player, let alone a functioning one? Enter We Are Rewind, the French company giving the retro medium a 21st century facelift. Rechargeable battery? Oui. Bluetooth and high-quality stereo sound? Oui and oui. With its sleek aluminium shell available in a variety of colourways, you can order a unit for just €149, or €154 with a blank cassette thrown in. **wearerewind.com**

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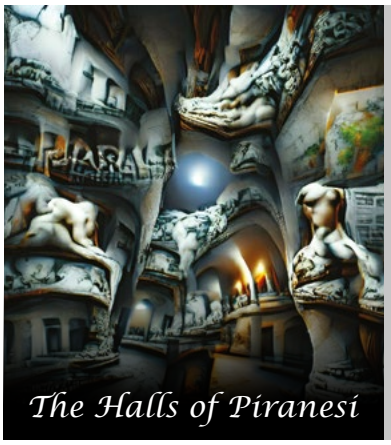


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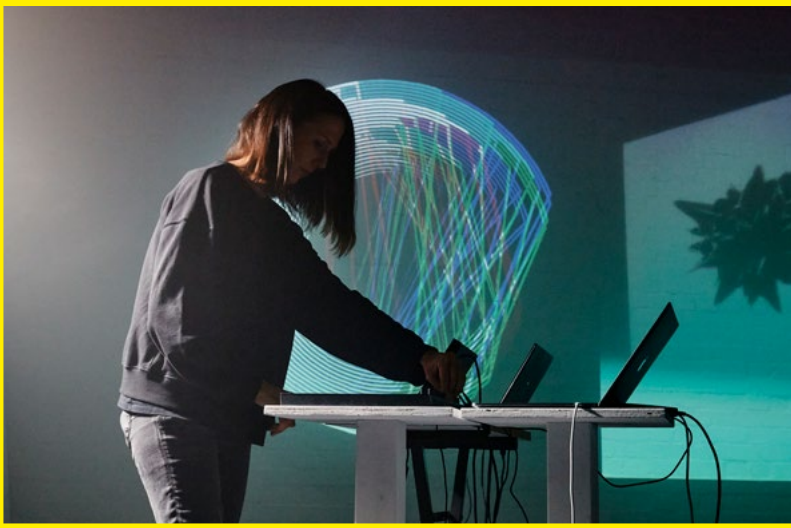

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# Grim Tales



"In England, no one can hear you scream…"
So say Sleaford Mods on their latest album, 'UK Grim'. Maybe their angriest record to date, it depicts the gritty reality of the here and now with typically acerbic rage and stinging wit. Rooted in barbed electronics and driving, clubby beats, it finds the Nottingham duo on blistering form

**WORDS: FAT ROLAND**
**PICTURES: ANDI SAPEY**

The last time I was in Nottingham, I went to a novelty Sheriff of Nottingham feast. Diners sat at benches drinking mead in wooden cups, harangued by said Sheriff in full amateur dramatics mode and waited on by scantily brassiered serving wenches. Yes, they called them wenches back in the 1990s.

I trust Notts has progressed in the decades since. Then again, I'm here to meet agitprop/electronic duo Sleaford Mods to talk about their latest studio album, 'UK Grim'. I don't want to overplay their boorish status, but I'm half expecting mead-splattered tunics, a lavish hog roast with all the trimmings, and a brutally enforced tax regime.

The two-man set-up is certainly simplistic. Almost medieval. Jason Williamson is their hardman lyricist, stony-faced and ranting. He speaks and half-sings about poverty and politics and whatever has piqued his angry interest. His sidekick is musician Andrew Fearn, whose brusque, lo-fi loops may well have been made by 14th century machinery. Their last album, 2021's raucous lockdown offering 'Spare Ribs', had them railing against "fucking class tourists" and "boring fucking cunts". If you think they were irate before, now they're bleeping livid. 'UK Grim' sees them as stirred up as ever.

"I didn't think we could get more angry, did you?" says Jason, turning to Andrew.

"This is a bit more introspective," says Andrew. "Musically, it's a bigger production. A few more flavours. Hopefully not too much, though. We're still trying to stay with…"

"I don't think you'd allow it, Andrew," interjects Jason.

"…things that you normally find in the Sleaford Mods bin. They're there if you look for them."

The first thing you notice about Jason and Andrew is how connected they are, like rutting stags locking horns but in a slightly less sexy way. They ping-pong thoughts back and forth, sometimes interrupting each other's sentences and quite often finishing them. Understandable for a musical partnership that's lasted more than a decade, with Andrew joining in 2012 to take the Mods in a more electronic direction.

The second notable thing about this pair of working-class East Midlands guys is just how thoughtful their anger is. Yes, there's swearing and directness, but it's not simply men yelling into the ether. There's something else going on that belies the rowdy reputation often perpetuated by the media, who paint them as uncouth lads with medieval attitudes. Oh heck. I'm beginning to choke on my mead.

OEUF
BASS

OEU

# T

he term "UK Grim", coined by music journalist Paul "Stokesie" Stokes during a livestream launch of 'Spare Ribs', is a witty take on the genre of grime music and the bleak socio-economic realities of the UK.

And it's the title track that opens this new album, despite being recorded last. In the song, Jason adopts the role of a call centre manager. A complete corporate droid – "Keep that desk area tidy / Put it in the bin," demands the fictional boss over Andrew's buzzy bass – inspired partly by memories of their own soul-crushing desk jobs, and by witnessing the super-rich in London's financial district.

"Me and my family went to see The Gherkin," says Jason. "All the streets were clean and shiny. This white Land Rover purred around the corner, and I thought, 'I want this comfort'. But it's grim because of the corruption of free market capitalism. Everyone's suffering because of a few individuals."

The closing track of the album, 'Rhythms Of Class', observes the contrast between rich and poor estates. Neat courtyard hedges and garden sprinklers versus McDonald's restaurants stinking of Lynx body spray. The images seem burned into Jason's mind.

"You'll see someone having a fry-up outside a caff," he says. "Then you'll go to a higher-class area, and there's expensive clothes and people casually relaxing in the park. You can go from one block to another, from misery to total happiness, from hell to utopia."

The perky 'Tilldipper' takes a more direct approach to money. Set against a percussive post-punk onslaught, Jason describes the art of nicking from your retail employer. The opening goes: "Put your fingers in the till / You don't care, you're in the kill / Drag the fucking money out / Spend it on some gear, you twat". Someone should do a WikiHow page on this.

"It's about taking money out of tills," says Jason, needlessly. "In most retail jobs I was in, everyone used to do it."

"Fucking hell, did they?" says Andrew. "Still, it's a bit nicer than warehouse work."

On 'Right Wing Beast', Jason stops talking about money, and instead considers deleting old friends on social media because they "keep coming in with stuff and it's winding me up, to be honest" – namely, conspiracy theories and dumb right-wing memes. Andrew's clockwork beat is cheerfully cheap, a perfect imitation of the throwaway nature of Twitter and Facebook.

"They talk about vaccines leaving some kind of chip in your blood," says Jason. "I can understand people being sceptical to a certain degree, but it's just a fucking vaccine."

"There's no information with it," says Andrew. "You can't draw anything from a vaccine."

"As long as it fucking cures me, I'm not bothered, you cunt," opines Jason.

The track also contains the excellent phrase, "Your head's full of sauce / You're a tin of baked beans".

"Andrew loves that line," says Jason.

# A

s we talk about the tracks on 'UK Grim', I can sense their blood boiling. The purring Land Rover, the well-watered gardens, memories writ large across Jason's face. I want to connect with these lads. After all, I'm from Manchester, they're from Nottingham, we're from the industrial cities of cotton and lace. At one point, though, I admit I'm actually from the posh, leafy part of Manchester, not from its downtrodden estates. I half expect to be catapulted out of the room.

The conversation softens when we chat about the dirty donk-house of 'Tory Kong'. The track critiques men who think they're more than they are. "Twat," go the lyrics. "What the URL you playing at?"

"This idea that the bloke does everything is bullshit," says Jason. "I'm just trying to put across an idea of what perhaps misogyny is." Which all sounds worthy and highfalutin, until he says, "The rest is based on the 'King Kong' film by Peter Jackson, which I think is brilliant."

Ah. Now. You can't stay enraged when you're talking about films you love. Imagine yourself watching 'Singin' In The Rain' and being apoplectic. You can't do it, can you? The 'King Kong' reference echoes 'Skull Island' – from their self-titled 2007 debut album – which, as everyone knows, is the home of the titular beast and his dinosaur friends. Films, it turns out, are a continuing feature of the work of Sleaford Mods.

There's another cinematic reference with 'Force 10 From Navarone'. This track is based on the 1970s adventure movie starring Robert Shaw and Harrison Ford, the latter freshly famous from 'Star Wars'. The film's forerunner, 1961's 'The Guns Of Navarone', is perhaps better known.

"I saw 'Force 10 From Navarone' when I was a kid. It was one of those war films from my childhood…" begins Jason.

"…that got stuck in your head," completes Andrew.

"My childhood was full of not-very-good war films like 'The Wild Geese', or whatever. 'Force 10' was not very good at all."

He pauses for a moment.

"Actually, I thought it was shit, to be honest."

They might not be selling the subject matter terribly well, but 'Force 10' benefits from a guest spot by Florence Shaw from South London post-punkers Dry Cleaning. Speaking over a splendidly furry bassline from Andrew, she commits to Jason's stream-of-consciousness style, calling someone a large green blob and asking people not to touch her roadkill hat.

"As soon as Andrew sent me that track, I was up for about two hours after [wife and manager] Claire had gone to bed," explains Jason. "I was pacing around the living room trying to come up with the patter. A couple of days later, it dawned on me that 'Force 10' was just screaming out for Florence Shaw."

"She came straight in to do it," says Andrew. "It worked really, really well."

"Really fucking well," adds Jason.

The film references go somewhat askew on the low-burning 'I Claudius', which recalls old movies screened on terrestrial daytime television when Jason was young, alongside memories of Adam Ant and, curiously, a Santa Claus eating a bag of chips.

"They used to show a Roman film every Christmas Eve on telly, didn't they?" remembers Jason. "It'd be 'Ben-Hur' or 'Spartacus'. I was in absolute awe of Victor Mature. The guy's fucking brilliant. Him and Charlton Heston."

Except it was the wrong film. The one he had in mind for this track was in fact the 1951 Roman epic 'Quo Vadis', not the Derek Jacobi TV series 'I, Claudius'.

"I fucked up," admits Jason. "In my subconscious, I got the two confused. It doesn't matter. I wanted to get over that feeling of Christmas Eve in my living room with my rockery mantelpiece. Everyone had a rockery mantelpiece. Fucking shocking, weren't they? Fucking rank."

Andrew has nothing to say about rockery mantelpieces. They don't seem worth getting angry about.

MANNHEIM
OEUF

One of the criticisms I suspect we may get for sticking Sleaford Mods on the front cover of this magazine is that they aren't electronic enough. The last time we gave them any coverage, one Facebook commenter declared he wanted to see electronic music acts in Electronic Sound, not "shitty rock bands". As a public service, I pass on this comment to Sleaford Mods. They aren't impressed.

"Andrew is a walking, talking electronic project and he's also had a lot of experience with live instruments," says Jason. "We have used both things, but it doesn't sound like fucking Depeche Mode."

"I think it's a very old-fashioned British idea that you can't have guitars and synths in the same band," adds Andrew in agreement. "We'll have one track with some crappy bass guitar I had in the corner of the room, and next we'll use a keyboard bass. People think it has to be done a certain way. It's like when they called New Order 'children with synthesisers'."

Children with synthesisers? New Order? Jason is appalled.

"Fucking hell!" he rails.

"What's wrong with that?" counters Andrew.

*"What's wrong with that?!"*

I guess you could argue that Andrew is himself a child with synthesisers. He refers to his kit as his "toys" and enthuses about his second-hand Teenage Engineering OP-1 music box. For the bassline on 'Force 10 From Navarone', he used Stages, a modular unit by newly defunct Eurorack developer, Mutable Instruments. He calls this a "Swiss Army Knife for ADSR [Attack, Delay, Sustain, Release]".

"It's quite nerdy," he adds. "You set it up and it'll continue to do its thing for ages. That's why it does that wuh-wuh-wuh-waah thing with the bass. Have a great time trying to write that word down."

Andrew has his own side project Extnddntwrk (pronounced "Extended Network" and not, as I originally guessed, "Extension Didn't Work"). Woozy loops and meditative IDM demonstrate a dreamier side to his synth work, not razor-cut and bass-focused like his Sleaford sounds. His Bandcamp output encompasses archive recordings, including a bunch of stuff he made on an Amiga in 1997 and tracks he created to accompany his GCSE exam revision.

These extracurricular studio sessions certainly don't detract from his work with Sleaford Mods, though.

"Sometimes I'll be noodling around making an Extnddntwrk track and I'll realise this is something for Jason," says Andrew.

He can instinctively identify the moment when an intended Extnddntwrk piece suddenly tips over into the lo-fi sparkiness of Sleaford Mods. Which is much to the Mods' benefit, of course, as it adds a curiously psychedelic electronic edge to their post-punk instrumentation.

"You just don't want a whole album of dsst-dsst-dsst-dsst," adds Andrew.

Jason is quick to pour praise on his music-making partner.

"It's alright me coming up with fucking lyrics, but if the music isn't doing it, I'm fucked," he says.

The pair have built up serious electronic music credentials in recent years. I'm not only talking about Jason's careening karaoke take on Yazoo's 'Don't Go', released two Christmases ago and described by various commentators as "pessimistic", "brutal" and "in the style of a drunk uncle". There are the big-name alliances too. For example, Jason ranted about bad music and cheap highs on The Prodigy's 'Ibiza', then faced the realities of dandruff and gallstones on Leftfield's 'Head And Shoulders'.

"Some of these are collaborations with just me," says Jason. "The Prodigy credited Sleaford Mods because it was at that point in our career when putting 'Jason Williamson' wouldn't have washed. Nobody fucking knew who we were."

Over lockdown, Jason teamed up with Ninja Tune veteran Kevin Martin, aka The Bug. The two tracks they worked on together comprised the electro-dark 'Treetop', which took aim at fake locals and five-quid sandwiches, and 'Stoat', with a wandering diatribe that challenged, in part, "tools in shops who don't wear masks".

Then there's the 'Dirty Rat' single with head-lit stadium legends Orbital, which attacks right-wing ideology around the NHS and migrants. Hours before it was released, Liz Truss resigned as UK Prime Minister, a turn of events which added weight to the track's most memorable lyric: "Shut up! / You don't know what you're on about / You voted for 'em / Look at yer!".

The single was a returned favour, after Orbital remixed 'I Don't Rate You' from the Mods' 'Spare Ribs' album. When planning 'Dirty Rat', Andrew had composed a whole track for Orbital. The Hartnoll brothers stripped out a single bassline, shifted it to the offbeat, and did their Orbital thing.

"It was all quite locked down," says Andrew. "We had a Zoom meeting, then we sent bits back and forth. Jason put the vocals on it, they jiggered it around, and that was it."

"Bang!" says Jason, summing up the speed of the creative process. "Our collaborations tend to be quick and easy because everything's done digitally. Especially with Orbital. They're similar to us because it's just two blokes. So it was all pretty straightforward. The only thing that took time was the talking. Going forward, perhaps we don't need to do that much. Next time, just text me!"

Despite these solidly soiled electronic roots, 'UK Grim' also has a nod to alternative rock with a guest appearance from Jane's Addiction frontman Perry Farrell on the shouty 'So Trendy'. This gives the album its most eccentric moment, with Perry applying an expressive skater boy drawl to a story about a "mysterious jet-pack man".

"He's a colourful character," Jason remembers of their first Zoom call. "Really nice guy and totally off the scale. Whoosh!"

"His voice, his writing, his style of music – it's so unique," says Andrew. "It made me realise how talented he is."

"I like collaborations," says Jason. "It's good for experience and blah blah blah. But you can't get that real juice until you get back to Mr Fearn, can you? He's the base of it."

Aww, you guys.

# W

e've mentioned New Order, famously attached to that northern industrial village of Manchester. And we've mentioned Yazoo, Basildon's best-known musical export if you ignore all of Vince Clarke's other projects. But it's difficult to talk about bands from Nottingham. Singer-songwriter Jake Bugg? Electronic musician Lone… although didn't he move to Manchester? And those miserabilists Tindersticks too, I suppose.

If anyone's flying the flag for Nottingham, then it has to be Sleaford Mods. This latest album was preceded by their 'Live At Nottz Arena' EP, recorded in autumn 2021 at the 10,000-seater Motorpoint Arena. A quick check of their ticket page reveals upcoming performances by Michael Bublé, Iron Maiden and Pete Tong. Jason was wowed by the size of the space.

"It's like a fucking aircraft hangar, innit?" you can hear him say on-mic.

The EP includes Sleaford staples such as 'Mork N Mindy' with Billy Nomates and 'Nudge It' with Amy Taylor from Oz punk outfit Amyl And The Sniffers. It also includes the Yazoo cover mentioned earlier and closes with their signature track, 2014's 'Tied Up In Nottz'. The release captures the same blistering energy you can see in the videos of their restless Glastonbury performances. However, they don't seem truly enamoured of concert releases as a concept.

"Live albums are totally hit and miss," says Jason. "You're justified if it's a monumental occasion. But even so, you only want to be doing one every five or 10 years."

"With some unsigned artists that I quite like, I can't keep up with them," adds Andrew. "They put too much stuff out."

"People putting loads of stuff out," echoes Jason. "It's just stupid. Well, not stupid but…"

"It's fine, but I'm not going to listen to it."

"No, I'm not either. I'm not going to touch it."

You see how that spiralled together? I swear these guys share the same brain. We muse about our home cities for a while, about the pleasures of Nottingham and the delights of Manchester. We fondly reminisce about their hard-earned nicknames of Shottingham and Gunchester.

"Nottingham's quite a small place, so I guess one or two shootings is enough to earn that nickname," says Andrew.

I relate my tales of visiting The Haçienda and not enjoying a moment of it. Crap nights, aggressive bouncers. As it turns out, Jason went there about the same time as me. We may have been in the same drizzly ticket queue, trying not to get shot.

"It felt murky and the dancefloor was dead," he remembers. "It's like any famous landmark that you visit which turns out to be a complete and utter anti-climax."

"Notts is like the Manchester of the Midlands," says Andrew. "But it's always been a bit more of an underdog than Manchester. All the northern cities need a big financial injection, don't they?"

Finance? Like a despotic sheriff returning to his much-loved hog roast, Jason is drawn back to his favourite subject of politics.

"The Tories give the cities just enough funding to not, in most cases, stand out in the street with your ribs showing," he says.

"For it not to be a war zone," says Andrew.

"Like in the film 'Seven', where he slowly starves that guy in bed to the point where his brain's mush and his heart's barely beating. That's a bit like what the Tories are doing to this country."

I know this is Jason's favourite subject because I've had a look at the band's social media. Especially their lively Twitter feed. I want to talk about this, so I lead into it by quizzing them about their relatively new TikTok account. They haven't posted much, apart from Jason pacing up some steps like Rocky Balboa while Survivor's 'Eye Of The Tiger' plays, a half-hearted Beatles/Abba word game, and an unlikely 'Prisoner: Cell Block H' tribute.

"Dogshit," says Jason and our discussion about the internet's trendiest platform leads nowhere, as if any other outcome was likely in a conversation between three jaded middle-aged men.

OK, so they are not going to embrace TikTok. But they really do have a track record with Twitter, that leading loud-hailer for blabbermouths. The @sleafordmods account has snapped at many enemies, including Priti Patel, Jacob Rees-Mogg, and Mumford & Sons' newly radicalised banjo-botherer Winston Marshall. On a lighter side, Iggy Pop tweeted his parrot Biggy Pop dancing to the Mods' 'Tweet Tweet Tweet' track, while Jason recently posted a photo of some lovely mince pies.

With Paxman-like brilliance, I confront Jason with the following tweets, which have been tidied up for editorial neatness.

"The 'This Morning' programme should be banned. Fucking rats."

"These Royal correspondents need offing. Sucky fucking rats. What a bin this is."

"So will there be any karma for these fucking governing, cash-chomping wank rats?"

"Beady Eye can fuck off too. Fucking rats."

"Doughnuts are rat. Cheap bollocks in sugar. Gash as."

The criticism of 'This Morning' evokes a guffaw from the Mods, while the Beady Eye diss prompts a regretful "Oh dear". The doughnut tweet is clearly taking things too far. Time to go for the jugular. I ask Jason what he has against rats.

"I used to work in this warehouse," he says. "And some of the lads were from Beeston. Everything with them was 'fucking rats'. It's not even a great curse word but it's the way they said it."

I point out that Twitter seems like a suitable platform for them. It's well suited to angry barbs sprinkled with humour. I also propose that they could easily quit Twitter. It's the most natural thing in the world for Gen Xers like us to down tools and no longer engage with the online world.

"Do you think so?" says Andrew, who looks surprised and a little scandalised at the thought of quitting any kind of technology.

"I'm all over the social media – all over it," says Jason. "But with TikTok, you've got to learn how to master it and I don't know if I can be bothered."

"In one sense, they're all the same," says Andrew. "Maybe one day, everyone will turn it off, go outside and talk to each other."

Gen X to the core.

At the time of writing, Nottingham City Council has 122,000 followers on Twitter, while Manchester City Council has 205,000. Just saying.

n 2007, Sleaford Mods' eponymous debut album sought to take down the music industry. Or at least, that's how it seemed. Within minutes of their very first guitar chord, they had a pop at 'Popstars: The Rivals' boy band One True Voice – "Boring bastards discussing the merits of The Fall" – and DJs playing Primal Scream's 'Screamadelica' too much.

Yet these young hellraisers weren't that young, even then. On the delightfully named second track, 'Teacher Faces Porn Charges', Jason confronts his already encroaching middle age. Over a barely disguised Roni Size sample, he drawls, "I'm 35 years old / And my mother is still putting money into my account / So I can go out and shop in flip-flops, pyjamas / To buy a plastic bag of beer".

Since then, Jason's agitated diatribe has become even more fervent. 'UK Grim' continues that by taking swipes at middle-of-the-road dullards, dickhead behaviour and, as we've come to expect, Tories.

There's self-contemplation on this latest album too, though. A knowing reference to being in a "shouty band", the hollow insistence that they don't need "disco naps", and Jason stating on 'Pit 2 Pit' that he's "been a good boy for five long years", before adding on 'Rhythms Of Class' that he's "swapped the coke nights for Coke Light".

Over lockdown, Jason and Andrew hit their 50s. I mention this because, when I meet them, I've had a tortuous journey from Manchester to Notts. My train-replacement coach ground to a halt in the fog-white Pennines because there were too many passengers for it to cope with the hills. As they kicked us off the bus into the misty murk, I'm pretty sure I murmured, "I'm too old for this" about a thousand times.

We whinge about the rail system for a while, but I'm more interested in how they're finding life as, well, angry older men.

The answer is more practical than I'd expected. They work out. Jason goes to the gym every other day, and Andrew says he wouldn't be without his kettlebells and protein shakes.

"There isn't any point in lifting weights if you're not going to take some protein shakes as well," advises Andrew, who may be Nottingham's answer to Joe Wicks.

I'm assuming that Joe Wicks isn't from Nottingham, by the way. You can google it if you want.

"We're not as hedonistic as we used to be," adds Jason.

"You just get to an age where everything changes," says Andrew. "You don't need to try and kill yourself with whisky to validate yourself."

After a change in management – Jason's wife Claire, who I talked about earlier, replaced their previous manager Steve Underwood in 2019 – Jason quit drink and drugs.

"This made our live shows better," he says. "Me and Andrew just grew up a bit."

The all-important question. Are you happier?

"Fucking yeah, both of us are," attests Jason, quickly. "It's nice to want to make those changes in your life. It's our job to stay together as a band, which is fucking really hard work, but somehow we've managed to do it."

In an unexpected twist, Jason recently became an ancient fisherman. Not an actual fisherman, but a role he adopted when narrating an anniversary audiobook edition of Alan Moore's 1996 novel 'Voice Of The Fire'. He also narrates the character of the 19th century Northamptonshire poet John Clare. We're doing the interview in the very studio in which Jason recorded his parts.

"Alan Moore's, like, totally fucking really good," says Jason. "His reputation precedes him, doesn't it? He's a big fan of what we do, apparently. Anybody like that who comes out in support of what we do is brilliant."

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Inspired by the image of Jason encrusted in barnacles, I posit the thought that the gravelly quality of his voice might sound even better as he edges closer to old age. It certainly seems to have worked for Bob Dylan. The suggestion goes down like a fisherman's anchor.

"I'm not too chuffed about that, to be honest. I would ideally like it to sound as fucking smooth as a baby's arse."

But he has been taking singing lessons. Breathing exercises, warm-up techniques, voice coaching. Working on that audible throat stretch that adds so much colour to his singing voice.

"You've got to use what you've got, haven't you?" he shrugs. "And if you feel restricted, that adds to it. The ideas that I bring to Andrew sometimes don't gel initially because what's in your head translates differently as soon as you start singing. But Andrew is really good at moulding and reshaping."

This is Sleaford Mods' 12th studio album in 15 years. And you can't be angry forever. At some point, you're going to break physically or collapse mentally, or at least ruin your voice.

They seem disappointed in their old references of hoovering up drugs and visiting strip clubs, and Jason talks a bit about addressing the misogyny of his past.

"I'm a work in progress on that front. Don't think I'm some fucking moral high ground expert, because I'm not."

But they're softer than they used to be. They must be. They sell socks and keyrings on their website.

"We had scarves as well, at one point," says Jason, proudly.

You wouldn't want to cross them in a dark alley, but this side of the Mods is quite endearing. It's evident in the interview – they're both jovial and eager to be polite. You can also hear it on 'UK Grim'. It's there in the gentle backing guitar of 'On The Ground', despite its sinister threats against online trolls. It's in the melancholic violin synth of 'Smash Each Other Up', despite its "fist fights near Sainsbury's car park". And it's all over the introspective 'Apart From You', complete with fully sung chorus about being lost in a metaphysical waiting room.

Jason is a keen reader, although he admits to losing focus after 40 minutes of turning pages, most probably because of the subject matter.

"I read critical theory," he states, somewhat matter-of-factly. "Anything relating to the fabric of society, whether it's an anarchist take or some philosopher's take. Some of the observations are quite interesting."

Jason is writing a book himself, as it goes. An actual book, with words and full stops and everything. He has previously published his lyrics and produced a short story collection called 'Happy Days' in which things were either "knackered and shit" or "new and shit". And although he's unlikely to release another fiction collection, this new book sounds promising. Something autobiographical. He's about 20,000 words in.

"I'm struggling with it, to be honest," he admits. "You get so many of these fucking whippersnappers releasing books. And I think, 'Oh, fuck off'."

"They're just putting out chatty Christmas books," notes a disgusted Andrew.

"It angers me so much."

"It's a waste of paper," says Andrew. "Young people haven't even lived a life. So why are you writing your life story, then?"

"I mean, how many more fucking books do you want to read on hedonistic fucking bands?" adds Jason. "I'm having issues with the validity of it."

"Big deal."

A pause.

"The irony is, my book is basically that," says Jason.

I suggest that fans tend to be obsessed with their favourite groups and a book laying out the internal workings of Jason Williamson's head would go down a treat.

"I don't know if our fans are obsessed with who we are," says Jason. "Because we're not enigmas, are we? I mean, you are, more so than me."

"Am I?" says Andrew.

"You're a bit more private."

"Yeah," concedes Andrew.

"It will take as long as it will," explains Jason. "I don't want to divulge too much. But I think it's important to put stuff in about breaking the mould of what it is to supposedly be a bloke."

Don't take too long about it, Jason. None of us are getting any younger.

# M

y trip to Nottingham is nearly at an end. We've established that Sleaford Mods are older and they're more thoughtful. They're more electronic too. 'UK Grim' is undoubtedly an electronic record, so perhaps some crusty guitar-heads will leave them snide Facebook comments.

In another sense, nothing has changed since that first album. They're still taking on what they view as crap music scenes. The second track on 'UK Grim' is 'DIwhy'. It starts with a MIDI beat in the style of something like Phil Collins, an MOR curveball that Andrew seems especially delighted with. It then sharpens its claws for its true victim – kids on the DIY music scene.

"You're talking to me like a seven-year-old / That's not gone to bed before they should do," go the lyrics. "You're not DIY / You're a fucking twat."

I ask Jason to expand and he gladly obliges.

"I've got into loads of arguments with people from the DIY scene," he says. "They somehow believe they have a higher moral ground because they are grassroots and haven't been bought out by the man."

"It's a paranoia, though, isn't it?" says Andrew. "It's almost like the more famous you become, the less you're supposed to have an opinion."

"A lot of it is based on jealousy," continues Jason. "We've helped set the musical landscape for the last 10 years in this country. People don't like it, and they look for any excuse to have a go."

After we finish our meeting, I get a thankfully uncancelled train home. While I'm relaxing with a warm Coca-Cola, I pop onto the Visit Nottinghamshire website. There's an advert for a Medieval Sheriff's Banquet. It's slightly out of date, but not that old – 2017, the year Sleaford Mods released 'English Tapas'.

"The night will be hosted by our very own Villainous Sheriff of Nottingham," boasts the advert. "Guests will enjoy a delicious three-course meal served by our wenches."

Yes, they called them wenches in the 2010s. My heart sinks. Maybe Notts hasn't moved on at all. Am I getting too caught up in the idea of the Mods being more mature and more sensible? Should I just allow them to be medieval lads and proud of it? Or perhaps this is closer to the truth – Sleaford Mods have moved on, leaving their home city behind.

Rewind an hour or so, when Jason's still in the middle of his rant about kids in the DIY scene.

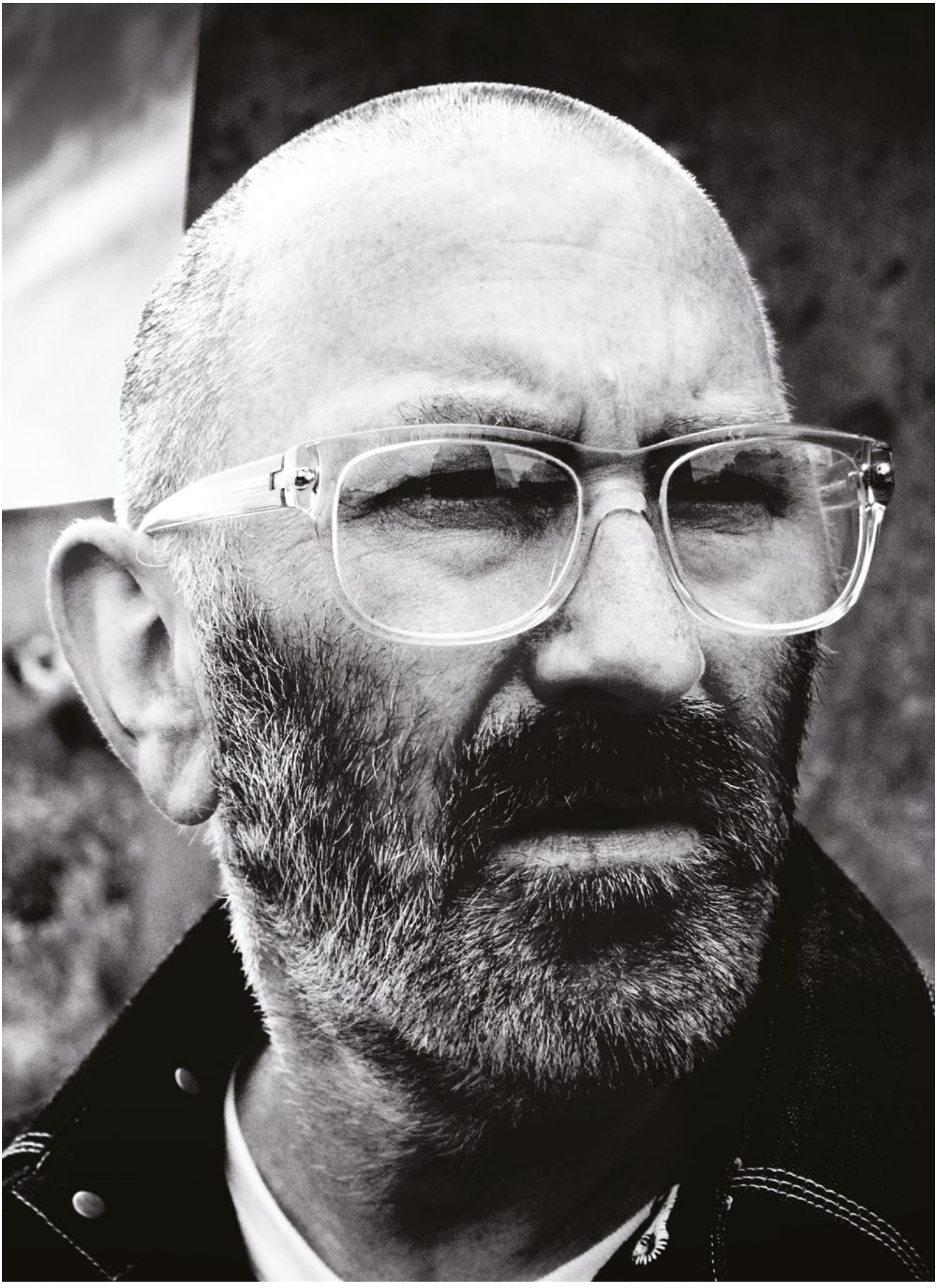
"You can't tell a young person that they're being an ageist little cunt, because they're not going to understand," he says, although I reckon Jason would definitely tell someone they were being an ageist little cunt. "To them, the idea of being old is repulsive, like it was to me when I was 26. So you can't tell people. History repeats itself."

"Yeah, right… wow," says Andrew.

An Orbital sample immediately comes to mind. "Where time becomes a loop…"

"And this is another thing," adds Jason. "Who am I? For a long time, I thought I was brilliant, but that's bullshit. I'm just somebody that works with somebody else, and the two of us produce very good music. And that's where it ends. Who are you to think that you are anything else?"

**'UK Grim' is released by Rough Trade on 10 March**



# BACK TO THE FUTURE

The first new Clock DVA studio album in 30 years explores a dystopian world where "machines of intimidation" rule. Founder Adi Newton muses on technology overload, the importance and influence of artistic experimentation, and how a 1970s Sheffield theatre workshop first turned him onto electronic music

**WORDS: DAVID STUBBS**
**PICTURES: E GABRIEL EDVY**

"The Bauhaus movement was about making good things – things that will last and look great – then concentrating on more useful and interesting matters," says Adi Newton, founder and ongoing member of sometime denizens of the Sheffield scene, Clock DVA. "What we've got today is consumption, built-in obsolescence and change for the hell of it. We're being made slaves to that necessity."

The Bauhaus reference is typical. Since his teens, Newton has been engrossed in the great art factions, the days of Futurism past. His talk is peppered with allusions to the likes of Paul Klee, Dada, suprematist artist Kazimir Malevich and Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, as well as theories such as projectivism and connectionism – all the towering ideals of the early 20th century from which he draws inspiration over 100 years on.

"At the turn of the century in Russia, there was a huge field of artistic experimentation, mapping movements of the body in a way that looks like CGI," says Newton. "Ideas like cosmism – the belief in mankind's evolution into the stars. They were thinking hundreds of years ahead."

Now that we are in the actual future, with dreams of mechanisation and automation having come to pass, all is not well, Newton asserts. Our current state of profound crisis is the subject of Clock DVA's latest album, 'Noesis' – the first DVA release proper since 1993's 'Sign'.

"Technology has made a massive difference to all aspects of society but brings with it dissatisfaction, alienation and also the narcissism of social media," says Newton. "There are inbuilt problems with it, and that's what we're trying to say with 'Noesis'. 'The Fall Of The Dream Machine' is about how people are occupied by Z-list celebrities getting married, this horrible rubbish on an enormous scale. Nonsense, really. Or TikTok – individuals posting videos of obscene things and others being drawn into it.

"These technologies have become ubiquitous and we have become controlled by them. We're controlled by electricity and economics… the reliance we have on technology is frightening. We should move towards something like play, to being freed by mass unemployment. We should be enjoying ourselves, having a good time. Instead, we're still in a world where people are living on the streets or are deprived of water."

It's paradoxical, although quite logical, that Newton and his musical partner TeZ (Maurizio Martinucci) should explore these topics via electronic means. Newton is no Luddite. The title of 'Noesis', he explains, alludes to "purely intellectual apprehension".

"It's an idea of how we think, why we think, and so on. The layers of apprehension and the dystopian fears the mind evokes can only be conveyed through electronic music – in this case, the dark ambiences and minimal pulses of tracks like 'The Simulation Of Self', 'Projected Life' and 'The Engines Of Intimidation'."

Newton once spoke of Kazimir Malevich's painting 'Black Square' and its deep influence on early Clock DVA ("It was saying nothing and saying everything at the same time"). 'Noesis', although a very different mutation of Clock DVA in comparison to their earlier work, seems to proceed notionally from the black space delineated by Malevich.

Like a great many of the musicians who would later make up the Sheffield scene, Adi Newton's creative journey began back in the mid-1970s with Meatwhistle, the "theatrical activity group" set up by husband and wife team Chris and Veronica Wilson in 1973. It was the perfect place for would-be free thinkers to hang out.

"Yeah, I was there," recalls Newton. "There were quite a few of us – all the Human League/Heaven 17 guys too – and it was the only place in Sheffield operating as a cultural hub. It was initially theatre but grew into different kinds of arts. The council funded it and there was no pressure to make us do anything. We just created our own theatre space. We were all pretty young and it was a great early beginning for us. I met Richard and Mal from Cabaret Voltaire and we started hanging out, socialising… we all had this interest in Dada, surrealism, Burroughs, Ballard, but there were very few people in this 'Sheffield scene'."

It's interesting that the key members of Meatwhistle chose ultimately to drift towards music, and electronic music in particular. Newton's head was quickly turned in that direction.

"They had these old tape recorders," he remembers. "Big old mint-green machines. I'd been messing around with tapes and started using loops. Then we were asked to provide some music for a party. Martyn Ware bought this huge, super-deluxe xylophone with an 'electronic eye', so you could vibrate the sound by moving your hand over it. Ian Craig Marsh had started building a big modular system, so we had a strange assembly of instruments. We didn't know what we were doing – we created a collage, I guess. After that, though, we thought, 'Maybe there's something in this'."

Fuelled by a sonic diet of krautrock and glam – especially Roxy Music – Newton, Ware and Marsh formed a short-lived but prescient outfit called The Future, setting up meetings with record companies rather than merely sending demos they knew were likely to be binned.

"We promoted ourselves as the future of music," says Newton. "We were very arrogant, but we felt that people needed to be confronted with this music to understand it."

Both the future and The Future were deferred, however. Newton resorted to making home electronic recordings on his battery of instruments, including the EMS Synthi E and other devices. These were later released on the boxsets 'Horology' and 'Horology 2' in 2012 and 2015 respectively, via Vinyl On Demand. These late 1970s experiments sound hauntingly primitive, ancient – like scratchy harbingers of a future ubiquity of electronica that seemed both hopeful and remote almost half a century ago.

Yet the iteration of Clock DVA that brought them to prominence in the early 1980s was less electronic in nature. 'White Souls In Black Suits' (first issued on cassette in 1980) and 'Thirst' (1981) dealt with the tropes of the times in their own particular way – as fraught, existentially anxious white boys expressing themselves through the supposedly antithetical medium of funk.

The discreet use of synths and musique concrète methodology was masked by the bass of Steven James Turner and the quasi-free-jazz saxophone of Charlie Collins shrieking into the void, as if channelling the spirit of Newton's troubled, weathered vocals.

Sheffield was the focus of critical attention from the music press at this point. A divide would develop between groups with pop ambitions despite their avant-garde origins, and those such as Cabaret Voltaire who simply couldn't bring themselves to head in that direction. Clock DVA were somewhere between the two.

Newton was firm friends with the Cabs and shared their left-field predilections. However, after the original Clock DVA split, with some founder members going on to form The Box, he brought in a raft of different musicians, signed a deal with Polydor and, with 1983's 'Advantage' album, looked conceivably set to join fellow Sheffielders The Human League, Heaven 17 and ABC onto a much bigger stage.

"I wanted to use those elements of big production to move what I was doing into a bigger arena, hence reforming after 'Thirst' and creating something more accessible with 'Advantage'," explains Newton. "I wanted to do it in a good way, not just a commercial way – something with an aesthetic like film noir, psychological, literary and artistic elements – and re-focus it."

Suddenly, Newton and Clock DVA Mark II found themselves jostling with the pop elite, including one night when they fetched up at the Parisian hotspot Les Bains Douches only to find The Rolling Stones filming a video, in which they were invited to take part as extras. They agreed. However, much like Chris & Cosey, who ultimately baulked at the prospect of going pop with their post-Throbbing Gristle forays into synthpop, Newton felt distinctly uncomfortable with their new context, which he'd felt forced into.

"It did get commercial and popular but we were being primed to be a stadium band," he says. "Live tours, T-shirts, records, these big goddamn concerts… there was one in Europe and I remember seeing Big Country come on. It felt ludicrous, these big lads with guitars, everyone going mad for them, and I thought, 'Why am I here? This is ridiculous'. I literally wanted to run away."

A further schism developed after guitarist John Valentine Carruthers left to join Siouxsie And The Banshees, resulting in a "strange and horrible" situation that Newton felt was needlessly acrimonious.

"It ended in a chaotic bust-up, so I left. I'd had enough. That, and Big Country, the albums, T-shirts, tours… I'm not here for that."

He formed the pointedly monikered The Anti Group, leaving behind all prospects of stardom and the nightmare that might have entailed.

Since the late 1980s, Newton hasn't been consistently active. He moved to the Netherlands, taking breaks to try to set up record labels or simply to live a normal life, doing everyday things. Many of his activities have slipped below the radar in the UK as he has prioritised other territories.

"We've not really been focused on England, especially with this Brexit thing," he says. "It solidified my belief about England not wanting to be part of a bigger world. I always considered myself a European because I interacted with Europe so much. Thing is, via digital streaming, we're all working on a global scale these days. That's the nature of the technology."

Furthermore, his recording career has seen Newton increasingly embrace electronica, taking him full circle to where he began.

"I found a way of being able to control sound in an almost mathematical, precise way. So it was me going back to my old days of pure electronics. My history is seen as beginning with 'Thirst', where the electronic elements are more subdued in the mix."

Having met his current musical partner TeZ back in the 2000s on what are now the ancient internet ruins of MySpace, that immersion is complete. As TeZ explains, before he became a collaborator he was a fan of Clock DVA and The Anti Group, who he saw perform in Italy in 1987.

"I followed the evolution of Adi's art and felt aligned with that kind of spirit," he says. "The feeling behind the music, the graphic art, booklets, texts, the more esoteric meanings. I was also in touch with people like Coil, writing letters, exchanging material through the post – cassettes, magazines, artworks. It happens digitally today, but back then it was physical. And I was into computer music – Ambisound. This is the next level of immersion – how we will further express ourselves through music and technology.

"I saw Adi publish something on MySpace – the first thing I'd seen from him in over 10 years. It was my chance to get in touch and speak about ambisonics [a state-of-the-art multichannel sound system] – mostly promoted through live performance, not records. You can put ambisonics on record but it's very complicated. I wanted to speak about the possibility of a digital installation, an immersive space. Adi liked the idea and we started to talk about it."

Newton has fully taken on board ambisonics, to the extent that he and TeZ are putting on a presentation in New York later this year at an "ambisonic museum", encouraged and assisted by a group of Clock DVA enthusiasts.

It's significant that before Newton was a musician, he was a painter. And it's significant that the credits for 'Noesis' give equal status to Gabriel Edvy, responsible for the artwork "visuals" accompanying the album.

"Painters have always been involved in music," he reasons. "Paul Klee wrote a book on sound. At the turn of the century, you had Russian artists translating drawings into sound. Today, a lot of artists expand into other media – audio, video, installation– to express themselves. So I think the connection between sound and vision is very close. I'm a painter. That's what I originally did, and I still paint now. Music is like painting – laying something down, creating a form and then fleshing its form out with colour and so on."

An increasing number of musicians have applied the formal sensibility of early 20th century avant-garde visual art to music, but in the early 80s this was a strangely uncommon practice, despite the number of musicians with an art school background. Discovering Dada – the Zurich-based (anti) art movement – was an epiphany for Newton, however.

"Suddenly, I was exposed to the world of Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Francis Picabia and Hans Richter," he says. "It gave me a great impetus to devour more and more of that. And then leading on to Surrealism, later Andy Warhol, found objects…"

For Italian musician TeZ, meanwhile, the Futurist movement was a part of his cultural background, albeit historically distant.

"The feeling of Futurism was strong but also taboo because of the connections between the Futurists and the Fascist Party," he says. "If you read the original artists, they are interesting because they act like a virus in the system – infiltrating and subverting. But that is not so well understood in Italy. For me, it was clear from the 'The Art Of Noises' idea [Luigi Russolo's 1913 Futurist manifesto], and it's so fundamental to our work as musicians."

Newton has worked with a great many musicians over the years, but in TeZ he seems to have found a partner he's in perfect sync with.

"Absolutely!" agrees TeZ. "How we work can't be explained by ordinary means of communication. An example… we were preparing a live show, and Adi sent me some material for recordings. The day before, I'd been talking to a friend about biocommunication, getting sound from living things – plants – and I was very, very excited. Then the morning after, I received the tracks from Adi… and the very first one involved this scientist guy working in biocommunication!"

For TeZ, Clock DVA are much more than a sonic data stream.

"There are conceptual, philosophical implications to Clock DVA that look to change the way we live," he explains. "I think this is very important to express, this sense of looking inwards – what kind of universe might there be? It's a big part of why we do this together.

"All of the tracks we produce are the result of close human interaction, as with the live aspect also. There's a very strong physical element. I do other remote collaborations with artists and that's fine, but with Adi we always wanted to be together in the studio."

Adi Newton agrees wholeheartedly. Despite his increased immersion in electronics over the years, his goal is to emphasise the person, rather than render them obsolete.

"We're trying to reinject the 'human-ness', the feel," he says. "That's why it's important that there are vocals on the albums – words, emotions, breath, heart. When I look at AI graphics, the rendering is very beautiful, but when I look into the eyes, they're empty – like shells. But I look at a painting by Bacon or Freud and I see something of their subjects' human spirit."

**'Noesis' is out now on ARMComm / Rizosfera**

# NATURE'S REQUIEM

Drawing on the ultrasonic sounds of the Amazon rainforest, the new album by Australian-Icelandic producer Ben Frost sees him collaging environmental recordings and complex electronics to stunning cinematic effect

**WORDS: SHARON O'CONNELL**

If there's one thing that Ben Frost is not, it's nostalgic. The work of the Australian-Icelandic composer, producer, sound designer and musician has always marked him out as future-facing, someone forever seeking fresh perspectives to guard against creative stasis, repetition and his own boredom. Since looking back is not Frost's way, the suggestion that this year's 20th anniversary of his debut album, 'Steel Wound', constitutes a milestone leaves him momentarily nonplussed.

On a bright January morning, as he crunches across the snowy streets of downtown Reykjavík, where he's lived since 2005, Frost is considering whether his idea of creative satisfaction has changed over those two decades. His method has certainly evolved from being heavily reliant on guitars to admitting strings, brass, prepared piano and harpsichord – and, latterly, making field recordings central to his power-ambient style.

"I don't feel there's ever been a moment where I've been satisfied – which is probably quite unhealthy," he decides. "Do you know the American visual artist Matthew Barney? He's become a dear friend over the years. He began drawing when he was a young man in college, playing football, and his whole process is very much connected to his physical body and sporting life.

"He started a series called 'Drawing Restraint', where he'd make physical impositions on his ability to create art. He would nail the piece of paper he was trying to draw on to the ceiling and then construct some kind of climbing-wall situation where he had to hang off one hand to make marks on the page. When you talk about a 20-year span of my work, that's definitely the kind of image and idea that comes to my mind – 'How can I keep making this harder for myself?'."

Why he consciously seeks out difficulty is a question that Frost still can't properly answer, although he sees it as relating to his methodology.

"It's partly because the work I do is a learning process, and every kind of learning plateaus. So then it becomes a question of, 'OK, you've reached that point now, so is that it? Or are you going to push it further, push it deeper?'. Wherever that drive comes from, it's definitely at the core of what I'm doing."

This constant push for challenge might seem somewhat bloody-minded, but it's produced some of Frost's most interesting work, much of which is collaborative. The groundwork for his 'Aurora' album of 2014 was laid during a trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) with the conceptual documentary photographer Richard Mosse and cinematographer/artist Trevor Tweeten, who made a video installation about the armed conflict there.

Frost's 2022 long-player, 'Broken Spectre', saw him teaming up with the pair again, recording source sounds in the ravaged Amazon rainforest for both his own album and Mosse's film of the same name. Currently producing a new solo album, in March he also releases 'Vakning', featuring unfiltered field recordings made with Francesco Fabris – more on this shortly – during the eruption of Iceland's Fagradalsfjall volcano in 2021.

Clearly an explorer of sorts, Frost is keen to push at the boundaries of his own experiences – be they sensory, emotional or existential – in pieces that are characterised by a vivid sense of place, even if those places are often unknowable or alien. His compositions (especially the solo, non-commissioned kind) are full of contrasts – darkness/light, familiarity/strangeness, calm/chaos, monstrousness/beauty – and have an elemental power. Menace looms while danger waits in the wings. He agrees that the creation of environments is a feature of his music, but reckons there's something more fundamental in play.

"Sound in itself has no physicality, but that it manifests in the physical world has always fascinated me," he says. "I remember being very, very small and standing next to a very big stereo system, just turning it up and being fascinated by the feeling of this invisible medium that's somehow manifested in the body. The way it could move objects on the table on the other side of the room and rattle windows… the way it could enact itself on the world.

"I remember reading about Nikola Tesla's experiments with resonance in school when I was a teenager. He would go to a building site and attach some

kind of motorised device to a metal beam and then tune the resonance to the point where this structure – which is made of steel, the foundation of human civilisation at this point – risks bringing the building down, just by defining the resonant frequency and repeating these tones over time. I think all of those ideas play into where my interests go."

Again, it's the lure of extremes – for Frost, they're thrilling and inspirational.

"I'm sure that this could all be worked out with a good psychiatrist," he laughs. "There's definitely a kind of attraction, and a big part of what I do has been about eschewing the middle ground, avoiding the comfort zone. And responding to emotional states, seizing upon moments. That's always been at the heart of it. 'Steel Wound' is a record I made 20 years ago, but even today there's a locality to that music for me – when I hear it, I'm immediately back in the house where I recorded it.

"It was basically my attempt at dealing with the loss of my grandmother, which was my first interaction with death. She was the most important influence in my life as a young man, and I watched her wither away from cancer. 'Steel Wound' was written and recorded around and directly after that event, but I don't believe it was a purposeful move. I think I was too young to process it, but looking back at it now, I can see it is the way it is because of when and where it happened."

Frost's output includes a handful of solo albums and numerous film and TV scores, as well as opera and dance projects. It has always been impressive, but lately he's been on something of a roll. Coming off the back of soundtracking three series of the acclaimed Netflix drama 'Dark', he scored '1899' for the same creative team and also released the previously mentioned 'Broken Spectre', which he views as bridging the gap between a personal statement and a film soundtrack. It stands in sharp contrast to his revelation in an interview following the release of 'Aurora', when he admitted to not knowing whether he had any more records in him. The very opposite has proven to be the case.

"Just after 'Aurora', I genuinely felt like maybe I'd said everything I needed to say for now," he explains. "My reason for making an album needs to be not just putting more music into the world, but rather a feeling of, 'OK, there's this thing I'm hearing in my head that I can't find in someone else's music, so I need to create it'. With something like 'Aurora', or even going all the way back to 'Steel Wound', those records are manifestations of a kind of music I wanted to hear [chuckles]. It's totally self-indulgent."

The kinds of places Frost's works have taken him – coupled with their minimalist, austere, glowering beauty and simmering threat, informed by modern classical music, black metal and ambient, weighted with geo-political and humanitarian meaning – have led to a certain public reading of him. It's that of a serious-minded, even stern man – a kind of dark lord of asceticism. So let the record show that Ben Frost is a convivial sort who certainly has a sense of humour.

"They should talk to my kids about that," he says wryly of the misconception. "It's all because I don't smile enough in photographs, but it's kind of true. There is definitely that perception, but the misunderstanding is similar to the fact that some of the most polite, genial and gentle-mannered people in my life are in black metal bands.

"My friends, my bandmates in Swans, Michael Gira… I mean, these are not lords of the 'dark realm', like Darth Vader. If there's a common thread there, it's that I'm drawn to those spaces. Not because I'm a depressed, stern person but because in the darkness, in those spaces, there's a lot to learn."

PHOTO: SALAR KHERADPEJOUH

BROKEN SPECTRE

Of course, there's also the potential of a different kind of perception connected to Frost's project choices. He's well aware of the issues raised by an artist in search of source sounds visiting the DRC, South America's Pantanal – the world's largest tropical wetland, now in danger of devastation from drought, deforestation and dredging – and Lesbos, one of the Greek islands in the spotlight as a result of the refugee crisis.

Of his work for 'Broken Spectre' with Mosse and Tweeten, he admits to "knowing how it reads".

"It's three white guys going to the Amazon on some kind of exotic holiday," he says. "The spaces we visited during the time we spent down there are some of the most genuinely horrific environments I've ever seen. It's the front line and it truly is like stepping back in time because you're seeing a process, a fast-tracked version of what happened all over Europe and throughout the Western Hemisphere 200 years ago.

"You're watching a developing nation destroy itself because their kids want the same shit on Facebook that our kids want – and it's horribly depressing to see. When people think of the Amazon, they imagine the sort of pristine, David Attenborough wilderness, and it really is a very skewed version of those realities."

The upcoming 'Vakning' ("awakening" in Icelandic), is a different kind of Ben Frost album. Partnering with Francesco Fabris, who collaborated with Frost on the 'Dark' series and is a composer and sound artist in his own right, it's a set of essentially raw field recordings (with treatment limited just to some very light EQing). Rather than construct an alternative reality, they document a real-life event – a volcanic eruption. With 'Vakning', the pair aren't artists so much as witnesses who hiked up lava fields – Frost during the day, when scientists, equipment and helicopters were everywhere, Fabris in the dead of night – wearing masks to protect themselves from toxic gases.

The album will be released on Room40, the label started by Lawrence English, a self-described "philosopher of listening" and fellow Australian.

"Lawrence and I have been friends for 25 years, and he's been a huge influence on me," says Frost. "He was the first one to really give me a proper introduction to field recording as an idea. It's something that's always been on the periphery of what I do, but over the years it's become clear to me that the more performative aspect is what's so fascinating about it. I think what I didn't understand as a younger man – and this is the direct result of doing it for so many years now with Richard Mosse – is how the microphone in these situations is a lens through which you kind of choose your subject.

"More than that, it's about the performance of listening, of standing in a space and choosing to press record – the stillness and the weird tension required to make a recording that doesn't require any post-production or hours of laborious, microscopic edits, where it has this uninterrupted, strange realism to it. That, I've realised over the years, is a truly, truly difficult thing."

Ben Frost has never been one for using his art to bang a drum. However, he agrees that Earth's fragility, the impact we have on the climate and natural environment and the impermanence of human existence are themes that loom increasingly large for him, involving a responsibility that's hard to deny as the clock ticks.

"I believe there is a moral imperative as an artist at this juncture to kind of start yelling, albeit in a way that's true to myself, to address the elephant in the room," he says. "And I don't see any bigger issue than the damage we're doing to the climate. That said, I believe some of the greatest atrocities in the history of art have been committed with the best of intentions. So it's a fine line.

"Maybe the most important thing for me is to continue making work that feels really honest and true to where I am in my process, in my journey – to just keep pushing the envelope so I'm mounting the challenges for myself, in whatever form that takes. I think that's the job, ultimately, when you're blessed with all the privileges that I've had in my career so far. It doesn't feel like the time to put my feet up and start taking easy shots. It feels like, 'OK, now you need to use that'."

**'Broken Spectre' is out now on The Vinyl Factory. 'Vakning' is released by Room40 on 10 March**

DURACELL

# REBEL WITH A CAUSE

Alexander Tucker's latest work is a posthumous collaboration with Keith Collins, Derek Jarman's former partner. The result is a touching homage to the iconic filmmaker and the inspiring landscape around Dungeness nuclear power station in Kent, where Jarman famously lived during the final years of his life

**WORDS: MAT SMITH**

**"Dungeness is at its best in the golden light of the summer. Twilight here is like no other. It lingers in a perfect calm." Derek Jarman, 'Derek Jarman's Garden', 1995**

Geographically, Dungeness sits in Romney Marsh, an area of coastal Kent in South East England. It's a place unlike any other, dominated by a vast shingle beach and bordered by a decommissioned nuclear power plant. Dotted with small, wind-battered fishing huts, it's a remote, alien landscape, dubbed the "fifth continent" by Richard Harris Barham in 'The Ingoldsby Legends' (1837).

Located within that bleakly beautiful terrain is a small house, its weatherboarding tarred a resolute black, its window frames a cheery yellow. This is Prospect Cottage, acquired in 1987 by artist, filmmaker, writer and gay rights activist Derek Jarman, which he shared with his partner Keith Collins. Collins was forever by Jarman's side in his final years. He organised Jarman's life and commitments, protected him from savage media criticism and gave him stability in the face of hopelessness. After Jarman died in 1994, Collins maintained the house and gardens until he himself passed away in 2018.

In 1991, a young Jarman enthusiast, fine art student and future sound artist called Alexander Tucker walked past Prospect Cottage with his father and, through a window, spotted Jarman writing at his desk. Despite Jarman's general fondness for unannounced visits by fans, Tucker decided against knocking on the door.

A few years after Jarman's death, Tucker befriended Collins. They worked together on a BBC Radio 4 programme about Jarman and always intended to collaborate again, but Collins' untimely passing thwarted those plans. Instead comes an album titled 'Fifth Continent' – a poignant tribute to Collins, filled with sounds created in the very room where the younger Tucker had watched Jarman working over three decades earlier.

**"I leave footprints for others to excavate." Derek Jarman, 'The Last Of England', 1987**

Over the years, either via his many collaborations or as a solo artist, Alexander Tucker has proven himself to be a dexterous and stylistically unpredictable musician, seemingly able to switch his instrument of choice at will.

"With everything that I play, I'm self-taught," he confesses. "To me, instruments are just materials. I think it comes from my visual arts background. Instruments are like clay or paint – something for you to mould and meld. There are so many ways to re-form sound and to make sounds with objects."

Tucker began working on his own in the late 1990s.

"I was doing noise guitar pieces," he explains. "That was my first foray into solo work, and I got to know quite a lot of people in the experimental improvising scene, like Richard Thomas, Duke Garwood and Paul May. I lived in a house with them and we were always improvising together."

As time went on and his sound palette grew, he decided to reserve the name Alexander Tucker for his solo work with guitar, pedals and electronics, adopting the moniker MICROCORPS for what he calls "more of a focused, experimental techno kind of thing".

'Fifth Continent' exemplifies Tucker's cooperative side, even if Collins was only posthumously present. In recent years, Tucker has worked with Astrud Steehouder and Luke J Murray (as NONEXISTENT), with Nik Colk Void (as Brood X Cycles), and has just finished an album with saxophonist Karl D'Silva.

"For the past few years, my main collaborator has been Daniel O'Sullivan in Grumbling Fur Time Machine Orchestra – a more experimental offshoot of our Grumbling Fur duo," he says. "One of the artists we've worked with a few times now is Charlemagne Palestine. That came about when Daniel

curated a couple of days of Charlemagne performances at Cafe Oto in London. For the second day, Daniel and I added the extended techniques and drone aspects of Grumbling Fur.

"When I ask somebody to collaborate on a track and they send material back for me to work with, it feels like a precious gift. I'm really interested in collage and assemblage, which again comes from my visual arts background. I love cutting up different things and layering them together, then getting this really surprising picture or piece of music at the end."

**"Late night on [Hampstead] Heath. HB gone leaves me quite adrift." Derek Jarman, 'Smiling In Slow Motion', 2000**

Derek Jarman met Keith Collins at a 1987 Tyneside film festival screening of 'Sebastiane', his controversial, taboo-shattering 1976 debut feature. It was the piece that signalled his signature directorial style but also his capacity to divide audiences. i-D magazine accurately summarised Jarman as being "secretly admired as the film genius of his generation while publicly he is neglected by both audiences and financiers". Collins would later appear in three of Jarman's films – 'The Garden' (1990), 'Edward II' (1991) and 'Wittgenstein' (1993).

"Derek's nickname for Keith was 'Hinney Beast'," says Tucker. "It's a Geordie term of endearment. In Derek's diaries, Keith is always referred to as 'HB'. Keith used to call Derek 'Fur Beast' because he was very hairy."

It's possible to get a good sense of the intimacy that existed between Collins and Jarman through the latter's frank and unswerving journals, 'Modern Nature' and 'Smiling In Slow Motion'.

Rarely a diary entry goes by where Collins isn't mentioned, either helping to pack suitcases, fixing something around the house, suffering another sleepless night thanks to Jarman's tossing and turning, making him laugh on his bleakest and most despondent days, or bluntly cajoling him into decisive action when he simply couldn't face creating. You feel his presence but you also feel his absence, Jarman's mood becoming introspective and pessimistic when Collins heads back to Newcastle or goes travelling with friends.

Dungeness was not unfamiliar to Jarman, and neither was Prospect Cottage. He had first seen it in 1986, while filming 'The Last Of England' – during which he was diagnosed with HIV – setting specific scenes within a landscape that struck him for its "otherworldly atmosphere… unlike any other place I had ever been".

Later, in spring 1987, Jarman set off with Collins and Tilda Swinton on a fateful hunt for a bluebell wood around Dungeness. They never did find one, but Swinton spied a "for sale" sign outside Prospect Cottage, and Jarman swiftly bought it.

By the time of his HIV diagnosis, Jarman had grown weary of London. Prospect Cottage gave him somewhere to escape to, where the less frantic pace inspired him in a way that the capital no longer could.

With a lot of help from Collins, the cottage was repaired and extended, and its distinctive gardens – formal to the front, wilder to the rear, each filled with sculptures Jarman crafted from the ample flotsam and jetsam arriving daily on the beach – were laid out and maintained.

Developing and tending the garden he called his "Gethsemane and Eden" became Jarman's main focus. Throughout his two volumes of journals, he talks about nurturing opium poppies or a climbing rose with considerably more enthusiasm than the film and book projects he was working on at the time.

**"Oh my heart rejoices in the roar of the surf on the shingle. Marvellous sweet music it is to my ears. Oh what joy there is in the embrace of water and earth." Derek Jarman, 'Jubilee', 1977**

Tucker's parents eventually moved to Dungeness, partly because of the number of times he and his father had visited over the years. By 1997, when they relocated, Tucker was in his second year at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where Jarman had studied in the 1960s. He found himself visiting his parents often, and you can trace the genesis of 'Fifth Continent' to one such visit.

"It was a really nice, still autumn day, which is quite rare at Dungeness because of where it is," he says. "When the tide is out, the shingle bed drops sharply down, so when you look back up, all you can see is stones right up to the sky. I was down on the shore looking for driftwood and when I looked back I could see this silhouette of a guy. It was Keith Collins, who I recognised from Derek's films. By that point, he had super-long hair and he was wearing Derek's old coat. I just walked up to him and started chatting to him."

Collins was living at Prospect Cottage, working as part of a fishing crew with a neighbouring family. After their first conversation, whenever Tucker was visiting his parents, Collins would invite him in for a cup of tea. The house was familiar to Tucker, principally from a 1991 Arena documentary, 'Derek Jarman – A Portrait' by Mark Kidel.

"I was obsessed with that documentary," reminisces Tucker. "I probably watched it more than Derek's films. So just to be able to go inside and see all the artworks, assemblages and objects was amazing."

KEITH COLLINS - PHOTO: HOWARD SOOLEY

DEREK JARMAN, PROSPECT COTTAGE, DUNGENESS, 1988

The pair became good friends, meeting when Tucker was in Dungeness or catching up in London after Collins relocated there. When BBC Radio 4 asked Collins to contribute to a 2016 radio documentary about Jarman, Tucker was his obvious choice to supply an audio accompaniment.

"Keith read a passage from Derek's journal collection, 'Modern Nature'," remembers Tucker. "I supplied a prepared guitar piece recorded using wind and atmospherics at Dungeness. I put the mic from a broken digital 8-track into the body of the acoustic guitar, and my plan was to hold it up and get the wind to use it like an Aeolian harp. It has to be a certain speed to really work, and on that day it was too windy. So instead, I just laid the guitar on the ground, where the grasses started knocking against the body and touching the strings and playing it."

Segments of that guitar piece appear again on 'At Dungeness', the final track on 'Fifth Continent', framing a moving narration by Collins recorded shortly after Jarman's passing in 1994.

**"The grandfather clock, which refused to work for weeks, now ticks through the day and night but has invented its own numerology – it strikes 13 quite regularly and then it's anyone's guess… five, eight, 10 and 13 again." Derek Jarman, 'Smiling In Slow Motion', 2000**

"Keith sent me an email in 2018," remembers Tucker. "It said, 'It's bad news. I've just been diagnosed with a brain tumour'. In the same email, he asked me to sort out the cupboards of CDs at Prospect Cottage. He passed away later that year."

Tucker obliged, visiting after his friend's death to go through the music collection. While there, he met Collins' husband, Garry Clayton, who was trying to restore the roof in spite of his grief.

Tucker had been planning a joint recording session at Prospect Cottage with Collins before the email made it clear this wasn't going to happen. He was determined to create an homage to his friend, which is what 'Fifth Continent' ultimately became.

"In June 2019, Garry suggested I should bring some equipment down to Prospect Cottage," recalls Tucker. "Keith was a voracious music fan and also made his own work, but he never intended to put it out there. I at least wanted Keith to have a release at some point. So I went down there with my modular system, a cello, a vocal mic and some recordings on a computer. I set it up at Derek's desk and started recording processed cello and manipulated voices, just racking up layers of improvisations. It was a complete and utter thrill to work in Derek's writing room, surrounded by those artworks."

Clayton loaned Tucker a digital recorder that had belonged to Collins. Trawling through the archive, Tucker found the two emotional monologues which bookend the album – 'In Smiling In Slow Motion' and 'At Dungeness'. Given how much of Collins' and Jarman's history was bound up in the walls of Prospect Cottage, it was important for Tucker to include field recordings made around it. He spent two days there, either capturing the natural ambience or improvising in the writing room. One sound that appears like a recurring motif on 'Fifth Continent' is the grandfather clock Jarman had installed at the cottage, its gentle positioning behind Collins' voice adding a grave mournfulness to his words.

"I was always aware of it," says Tucker. "It just made a great sound. I wasn't even thinking of the passage of time or death."

Back in London, Tucker applied his characteristic collage process, chopping up and editing sounds, inviting musician Kenichi Iwasa to add his own sonorous touch to the drone-heavy compositions.

"Ken plays with Exotic Sin and Maxwell Sterling," he explains. "He sent me a bunch of improvisations, and then I cut up sections where he's doing these almost impossibly long notes. His playing has a beautiful melancholia."

It's the confluence of these elements that gives 'Fifth Continent' its distinctive sonic and emotional impact. The album and its accompanying book, 'Fifth Quarter', are freighted with both remembrance and significance – for Collins and his devotion to Jarman, for Tucker's friendship with Collins, for the unique magic of Prospect Cottage and Dungeness, and for Tucker's own personal connections to the area.

**"I walk in this garden, holding the hands of dead friends." Derek Jarman, 'The Garden', 1990**

The extract from 'Modern Nature' that Alexander Tucker and Keith Collins worked on in 2016 was about a life still being lived, whereas the 'At Dungeness' track is a thoroughly brutal exposition of Collins' grief. It is what exists after the full stop of Jarman's final entry in 'Smiling In Slow Motion', written on 31 January 1994, his 52nd birthday and a fortnight before his death: "HB true love". Collins' words were recorded in the epicentre of his loss, shortly after Jarman passed away at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London.

'At Dungeness' might be unique to Collins' experience, but it is relatable in a universal way. He vividly recounts putting on Jarman's coat, hung expectantly in the Prospect Cottage hallway for its owner to wear when tending to the gardens. Collins finds a 20p piece in a pocket and is struck with sadness at the discrepancy between something so intensely personal to the friend he has lost and a mundane, quotidian, mass-produced coin.

"Everything I've ever made before this was a product of my world-building," offers Tucker as we mull over the cruel sentiments of 'At Dungeness'. "Most of the time, I make the work first and then think, 'Where is this coming from? What's been influencing me?'.

"With this album, it was much more considered," he continues. "There was an intention. It was the first time that I had somebody else's life in my care. 'Fifth Continent' became more of a reflection on the outside world, rather than just my interior. I can see now that my music has been moving towards this point for a while."

**'Fifth Continent' is released by Subtext Recordings on 24 February**

# THE WEIRD DREAM TEAM

Stephen James Buckley and Mark Burford are Polypores and Field Lines Cartographer respectively. Holed up together in a remote Lancashire church, their minds frequently wander to cosmic vibrations, pixelated dream states and chain-smoking ghosts…

**WORDS: BOB FISCHER**
**ILLUSTRATIONS: JOEL BENJAMIN**

Two figures are striding purposefully through the mists of a frost-coated Lancashire churchyard. Their breath hangs in the air against a backdrop of snow on the distantly brooding Pennine hills. Stephen James Buckley is tall and lugubrious with the drooping moustache of an Edwardian police sergeant. Mark Burford is impish and sparkly-eyed with a bushy chestnut beard.

In another era, they would be a hilarious music hall double act – Stephen And Mark And Their Amazing Dancing Pianos. Instead, as Polypores and Field Lines Cartographer, they make floating modular synth soundtracks to decidedly unusual frames of mind.

"As I'm falling asleep, weird phrases drift into my head, and sometimes I say them out loud," confides Stephen, his boots gently detonating brown puffball mushrooms amid the lengthening shadows of the 19th century gravestones. "I've recorded them with my phone at the side of the bed. My new album, 'Praedormitium', was inspired by that hypnagogic state – the state between wakefulness and sleeping where you start to experience all sorts of strange things. Would you like to hear one of the recordings?"

He pulls his phone from his pocket and slides a finger across the screen.

A recorded voice – a loose-lipped, half-asleep version of Stephen – mumbles softly from the tinny speaker into the pale afternoon air. "These things take place in a little process called Guinness. The fingerprints of pop culture… Margoid Huntington." What the hell does that mean?

"Who knows?" he shrugs. "But I felt the ideas I was exploring musically lent themselves to that drifting feeling. The record is quite fragile-sounding and crystalline, and the first track – 'Frost And Moss' – was actually recorded on Christmas Day 2020. I'd gone for a walk, and the frost on the moss was beautiful, inspiring. So it's a very pretty, twinkly album.

"A lot of what I do I can't really explain, but I know intuitively that it feels like the weird space between sleeping and wakefulness, while also being frosty and bright and magical."

'Praedormitium' is Stephen's fourth album for Castles In Space. Curiously, 2022's 'Dreamtides' by Field Lines Cartographer on the same label also uses immersive modular textures to explore the nocturnal wanderings of the unconscious mind – in particular, the lingering aftershock of a dream that left Mark stranded on an imaginary pixelated shoreline, watching geometric shapes drift past on the "triangular tides" of some fantastical sea.

Make no mistake, these are two men who fully appreciate the creative potential of a bloody good kip.

"I've always found dreams fascinating," nods Mark. "And 'Dreamtides' was this one specific dream I tried to articulate in music. It left such a strange impression on me that I couldn't sleep for days afterwards. All the colours were wrong – everything looked hyper-vivid. It still freaks me out when I think about it now."

"It sounds more like a near-death experience," frowns Stephen.

We decide to leave the graveyard.

An ancient wooden door creaks open and we're finally out of the biting cold and inside the vestry. Shireshead Old Church was built in 1757 to serve the doughty parishioners of this tiny Lancashire hamlet. By the turn of this century it had fallen into sadly crumbling disrepair, until Lancaster musician Mark Burford and a cosy consortium of friends had the vision and foresight to bring it back to life, converting those deconsecrated transepts into a state-of-the-art recording studio.

Entering the control room is like passing through a portal – a magical transportation from windswept Pennine penury to plush, centrally heated, air-conditioned modernity. There are keyboards and mic stands everywhere. Strong tea is brewed. Fingers start to thaw out as we slip into comfy chairs and Mark starts explaining how the new Field Lines Cartographer album came to be called 'This Vibrating Earth'.

"It just dawned on me that everything in the universe essentially consists of stuff vibrating at different frequencies," he says. "And that's exactly what music is too. So I had this image of the universe singing to itself, which I thought was a beautiful notion – and I also realised its death occurs when everything stops vibrating. I wanted this album to be quite grounded. I was thinking about the basic hum of nature, of plants and animals, so musically it's probably the simplest thing I've done."

"Simple lines intertwining…" smiles Stephen wryly.

"Sorry," says Mark. "We can't have a conversation without quoting 'This Is Spinal Tap'."

The two met around 15 years ago when a youthful Stephen approached Shireshead Studio seeking an honest living. Despite their close friendship, the duo ostensibly remain employer and employee – the genial Lancashire mill owner with his humble foreman on the factory floor.

"He turned up at the door with a little knapsack," chuckles Mark.

"I heard the streets of Shireshead were paved with gold," deadpans Stephen. "At the time, I was working in a Starbucks in Preston. I'd graduated from university with a degree in multimedia and sonic arts, but I wasn't doing anything with it. Then, through a friend, I discovered they needed someone at the studio.

"I remember thinking that Mark was very quiet and we'd have nothing in common. But we bonded over films, and when I started making electronic music, we became a lot closer. He lent me albums by Boards Of Canada and Legowelt, which were a huge influence on me. Before that, I'd been making rock music, which Mark wasn't really into."

And Mark's earliest opinion of the youthful Stephen?

"Quite intense and very cool. He could be quiet and somehow not quiet, all at the same time. And he used to glam up when he was playing with rock bands. He was very handsome and he'd wear eye make-up, whereas I'm more comfortable hiding behind machines and keyboards. If we're still talking 'Spinal Tap', I'm Viv Savage. But I like to proselytise about electronic music, so when I saw a weakness in Stephen, I pounced."

Mark had been "playing around with keyboards" since his teenage years. Arriving in Lancaster as a student, he formed a techno duo called Dfuse, supporting the likes of A Guy Called Gerald at 1990s end-of-term "extravs". The debut Field Lines Cartographer album, 2016's 'Magnetic Anomalies', was the culmination of 25 years' worth of electronic dabbling.

Stephen, meanwhile, is bashful about his "messing about with mates" exploits in various youthful Lancaster rock groups. I ask if Mark's influence had encouraged him to make the musical leap from battered Telecasters to synth patches and modular cables.

"I don't think he inspired my decision to do it," muses Stephen. "But once I'd started, I thought, 'Hang on, I'm working with a guy every day who can answer any question I have about electronic music'. It was like having a cool older brother with a great record collection."

"I can't take any credit for what Stephen has done," says Mark, generously. "In eight years, he's already eclipsed what had taken me two decades. And the contrasts are interesting – you could give us the same synths and the same patches, and we'd produce something completely different. Sometimes I do a tiny thing that makes me think, 'Oh, that's a bit Polypores'."

"And I sometimes think, 'This is quite Field Lines Cartographer!'," admits Stephen with a grin.

"But it's only ever a hint," insists Mark. "We come from the same place, but we see the world through different lenses."

Both men cite the everyday oddness of their late 20th century childhoods as inspiration. For Stephen, it's 'Labyrinth' and 'The Usborne Book Of Ghosts'. For Mark, it's JRR Tolkien and 'Fighting Fantasy' gamebooks.

Is there something deeper going on here, though? For both Stephen and Mark, the strangeness seems to have profoundly impinged upon their day-to-day experiences. The ghouls and goblins lurking in the murkiest corners of their favourite stories would seem to have spilled over into the rustling woodlands of Lancashire and Warwickshire respectively.

"I grew up in Warwickshire, halfway between Coventry and Rugby," says Mark. "There are various stories – from actual archaeologists – pointing to a local place called Napton-on-the-Hill as being the last resting place of stone fragments from the Ark of the Covenant, probably brought there by knights returning from the Crusades. I love things like this. I don't really care whether they're true or not. Britain is such an ancient country that stories like this exist *everywhere*. And the world is that much richer for them."

Even as adults, transplanting weirdness – mythological, fictional or even biblical – into the mundanity of the everyday is the only thing that gets some of us through the cold winter nights.

"Absolutely," agrees Stephen. "I've always superimposed fantasy onto reality. I make up daft mythologies about real-life people. There was a lab assistant at my school, and we once thought we heard a teacher refer to him as 'Erk'. So we made up an elaborate backstory about our pottery teacher, Mr Barrett, making him from clay. Like a golem.

"One day, Erk disappeared, so we decided he'd become self-aware and blossomed. But a few years later we saw a photograph from the girls' school across town, and guess who was in it? Erk. So we concluded there must have been multiple Erks, all created by Mr Barrett. A lot of my friendships have been rooted in a shared ability to construct a fantasy world – something that's based on reality but becomes untethered."

The breakthrough Field Lines Cartographer album, 2020's 'The Spectral Isle', was inspired by salty medieval tales of Hy-Brasil, a "phantom", mist-cloaked island in the Atlantic, reputedly populated by giant black rabbits. Polypores albums have also explored similarly fantastical environments. 'Flora', released in 2019, was a dreamy exploration of imaginary oversized forests on alien planets, while 2020's 'Azure' floated dreamily through the tropical waters of a mythical underwater kingdom.

Can they, I wonder, recommend mental techniques to ease that transition from everyday tedium to extraordinary flights of fancy? I need help, I tell them. I've got tax returns to sort out and I'm losing the will to live.

"Salvador Dalí used to sit with a metal plate on the floor, holding a coin above it," says Stephen. "Then, when he began to drift off to sleep, he'd drop the coin and – very slightly – wake himself up. That allowed him to access his own hypnagogic state. I've tried to do this, but I'm a terrible sleeper and I don't actually like doing anything that messes with me falling asleep."

"My meditative state is actually when I'm making the music," adds Mark. "The house could fall down around me and I wouldn't notice. And I love that. I'm just doing what I'm doing, and it uses up my entire brain. My wife will say, 'You've not been to the toilet for over six hours now'."

"That's my favourite thing," agrees Stephen. "It goes back to me playing with Lego as a kid. My parents would say, 'You've got to go out and play with your friends now!'."

Stephen James Buckley and Mark Burford are wonderful company. Their partnership extends beyond music and, indeed, the confines of this earthly realm. On the drive over, down the bleak and fog-bound A66, I'd listened to an episode of a new podcast, 'Vayse'. Launched in September last year, it's an engaging vehicle for Stephen and his childhood friend Peter C Hine to explore "mysticism, magic, high strangeness and the occult".

"Peter and I met when we were 10, and we'd go out hunting ghosts," recalls Stephen. "The podcast is essentially us being keen learners about the esoteric. We don't claim to be authorities. We just want to know more. It's us exploring all this nerdy stuff – ghosts and UFOs – without caring what people think."

In the episode I listened to, the pair invited a guest contributor to recount the tale of an eerie presence in his Lancashire home. Stand up, Mr Mark Burford. So does Field Lines Cartographer, to paraphrase the mighty R Dean Taylor, have a ghost in his house?

"Well, we *did*," he smiles. "Our house is about 170 years old, a classic Lancaster terrace, and I was doing some work on it. My wife Nicola and I would sit on the sofa and find ourselves saying, 'Did you see that?' – a shape at the top of the stairs in our peripheral vision. But as soon as we looked properly, it vanished. Other people saw it too. Friends would visit and say, 'What the hell's at the top of your stairs?'.

"Then we noticed the smell of cigarette smoke appearing at the same time. So, for want of a better word, it was a ghost. And Nicola decided to be nice to it… she said, 'We're not going to hurt you, and we hope you don't mind what we're doing to the house'. And that's pretty much been the end of it. The cats still see it sometimes, but they're cleverer than us."

On which note we glance nervously around the shadows in the farthest corners of the studio and decide to cut our losses. It's barely 4pm, but the sun has already set on this bleakest of winter afternoons. As we leave our empty mugs on a tea tray in the vestry, a cold blast of Pennine air whistles in from the crepuscular churchyard. Still, it's not a bad place to work, is it?

"In the summer, it's idyllic up here," says Mark.

"But when the weather gets bad, it really is a total fucking nightmare," grimaces Stephen. "Especially when you don't drive and you've got to walk to the bus stop."

It doesn't stop him refusing a lift, though, and pulling up his parka hood to tramp down the hill, as Mark busies himself turning out the studio lights. Stephen and Mark – And Their Amazing Dancing Pianos – are once again lost in their own worlds, happily marooned in an evocative corner of Lancashire that feels forever trapped in its own blissful dream state.

**'Praedormitium' and 'This Vibrating Earth' are both out now on Castles In Space**

Co-founder of the Finders Keepers label, Andy Votel has spent three decades downplaying his obsession with hip hop. Reuniting with his original crew, the clandestine MC, beat-maker and sample head talks about the fear and friendship that made it all possible

**WORDS: ANTON SPICE**

# A TRIBE CALLED VOTEL

It's 1989, and 13-year-old Andrew Shallcross is in his dad's workshop in Stockport, near Manchester, soldering the speed control from an old Hornby train set onto a pair of nine-inch turntables. The cables have been stripped and Sellotaped to old speakers salvaged from the local tip. He's buzzing on blue Smarties and Run-DMC tapes. With money earned working at the butcher's, he spends his weekends tracking down samples, mind blown by the sheer have-a-go audacity of making new music from old records.

"I couldn't believe that if you found the snare and pressed pause after the beat, then did it again and again and again and then pressed play, it worked," he enthuses. "After that, we just needed to find as many sounds as possible. It's on the wrong speed? So what!"

The image Andy Votel conjures of his younger self is riotous. Sparks fly from anecdotes about mangled tape decks and maniacal school disco freestyles. Before Twisted Nerve, the label he co-founded with Badly Drawn Boy in 1997, and before Finders Keepers, which is now one of the country's pre-eminent reissue labels, Votel wrote lyrics, made beats and hung with a crew of upstart dreamers on Manchester's underground hip hop scene. It's just taken him three decades to tell anyone else about it.

Nothing thrilled a young Votel quite like running his mouth over a junk shop beat of cut-and-paste soul records. But opportunities to do so for an only child in a city embracing house and indie were scarce. Instead, he dived head-first into the creative art of sampling, beginning a journey into the undergrowth of recorded music that would sustain him all the way through to his work with Finders Keepers. Yet, to begin with, preservation was not his priority.

"I was really more into the destruction of music," he explains, recalling the madcap experiments that helped shape his fascination for music's physical qualities. That hip hop was still being filed next to punk at Manchester's Piccadilly Records made perfect sense to him, as did turning up to school with the lyrics of Eric B & Rakim's 'Move The Crowd' scrawled all over his jeans.

One Sunday evening in April 1991, Votel found himself at Manchester's Sunset Radio for Leaky Fresh's 'Out To Distress Rap Show', hoping to listen in. Gang Starr were the guests, and while frontman Guru did his thing, an awestruck Votel was left to make small talk with DJ Premier about records, perform a few of his own verses, and receive advice on how to find the samples no one else was looking for. It's the kind of formative experience you're legitimately allowed to tell people about for the rest of your life.

Within a week he had a job taking shout-outs, and within two he had hooked up with a bespectacled MC named Boney Fresh, from a motley outfit who called themselves Violators Of The English Language. From one day to the next, Votel's universe exploded. He had found his people.

"I wouldn't be doing any of this if it wasn't for meeting Premier at the radio and answering phones there when I was a kid," he admits.

There is a book to be written concerning what happened next – about the local record shops, radio stations, block parties, rap battles and bedroom MCs that were the lifeblood of a community largely ignored by the outside world. A 2014 article in Vice magazine about Britcore, "the UK's forgotten rap scene", described the sound as one of "angst, chaos and urgency" that burned bright for a time but ultimately couldn't compete with the allure of rave and jungle. Even now, Votel struggles to define quite where it all fits in.

"We thought that we had to be really true to our British roots, so overnight we all started rapping in Cockney accents, even though we were from Stockport," he laughs. "But if nobody knows what you're doing, then how could you be doing it wrong?"

As is often the case, the tighter the cast, the larger the characters loom. Votel rattles off names that have passed few lips in the intervening years – Hardnoise, Gunshot, Hijack, Black Radical. The likes of DJ Semtex and, latterly, Mr Scruff stick out like rocks in the stream of artists, producers and chancers who made the scene feel so intoxicating.

As for Violators Of The English Language… let's just say Votel, Boney Fresh and co weren't interested in posterity. Holding out for a deal that never arrived from London hip hop label Kold Sweat, they filled lyric books, cut demos, tagged banknotes, goofed around and stubbornly refused to make it big.

"It was so all-encompassing," Votel remembers.

When close friend and co-conspirator Craig Todd (aka Smear) died from a nut allergy, the group reeled.

"It kicked us into overdrive, but it also exhausted us," Votel says, recalling what was undoubtedly a difficult time. "It took a hell of a lot of friendship and trust to do all that. There's no way I would have done this without the crew."

Although a collection of instrumentals was eventually released on Grand Central Records in 1996, the closest Violators ever got to the mainstream came with the kind of caveat that would test most friendships. A major label had come knocking, but only wanted solo records. Votel baulked. There was nothing without the collective.

"My dad had always been really supportive but he didn't speak to me for weeks," he says. "But they had basically just dissed my crew. When you're 18, it just feels crazy. You can't do that!"

While you get the sense Votel finds his rap persona completely hilarious, his feelings about that time remain as real as they come. Because, in the end, nothing will ever matter more than a teenage escapade.

Most people would agree there are few more terrifying things than revealing yourself to be a closet MC a few years shy of your 50th birthday. But then again, maybe that's the only way.

"One energy I never tapped into was fear, and that's what probably held a lot of this back," Votel explains. "That stage fright, if you bottle it, just gets stronger and stronger. When you've been through feelings like excitement and competition in your life, eventually it's like, where's your energy source coming from now? And fear, believe it or not, seems to be one of the most profound energy sources that I've ever worked with."

The decision to revisit those early years has been gradual but somewhat inevitable. Over pints at The Golden Lion in Todmorden, Yorkshire, Votel and the gang got back together, not so much to reminisce as to keep the fire burning. More often than not, they found themselves returning to the topic of local hip hop.

"I was like, 'We can't just keep bitching about this unless we're going to rap… let's just do it'," says Votel.

Digging out the notebooks and reconvening in the same old shed behind his granddad's shop – intermittently also the Twisted Nerve and Finders Keepers stockroom – Violators Of The English Language made their return.

So, step forward Andy Votel, formerly Pigstyles, now Adverb; Mark Rathbone, aka Boney Fresh; Derek Edwards, formerly Taste, now Figure Of Speech; Steven Cunningham, formerly Yogi, now Community; Eduoard Lyons, formerly Chien Fou, now Lyons & Tigers; and Rick Myers, the group's longstanding scratch DJ.

"Lyrically, a lot of the concepts are based on teenage ideas and some old samples we used in the mixtapes," Votel says, describing a process that feels frighteningly like reading your old diaries. Completing half-finished projects is one thing, but reanimating them with the hindsight of a life lived is something else altogether.

"Everybody just had to go for it straight away and do their full 16-bars without stopping. The pressure was crazy, but we were all totally supportive of each other's fears and whims."

The Native Tongues of Northern Contemporary Britcore. Maturing mad villains of their own Peak locale. Rapping alter egos and kamikaze MC lifers, ready at last to bring their timely Mancunian flow to the world.

"We're a seven-headed, 14-legged beast," Votel laughs. "But one thing I never realised is that at this age you get out of breath…"

In November 2022, Violators Of The English Language dropped a self-titled album of tracks "written sporadically between 1991 and 2021". Working with The Golden Lion, Votel also released a second 12-inch by Magnets – featuring Adverb (himself), Benjamin (Hatton, formerly of Mongrels), Jenny Chan (aka Penny Chew) and Demdike Stare's Sean Canty – and Pro-Verbs, featuring Adverb, Figure Of Speech and Rick Myers. If that's a lot to take in, it's because they all still have a lot to say.

Across all three of the projects, Votel is credited as beat-maker, finding an outlet at last for all that bootstrap tinkering and the countless hours spent scouring the fade-ins and outros of obscure records in the flea markets of northern England.

"I've still got thousands and thousands of records I bought for just one bar of music," he laughs. "And it's like, 'You bought these for a reason back then, so you've got to see it through'."

Or, as he rhymes on 'Rewind', "Now let me get this shit straight / So now I'm 28 years late / It was '93 until infinity / But hold on wait, now it's 2021 / Where's the bastard time gone? / Decades on the run / What the hell is going on?"

The nuances of ageing are not standard hip hop tropes, but they're sentiments to which many will relate. The sense of urgency is profound.

"We're not stopping," he exclaims. "It can't stay buried any longer."

The stories Votel tells of his lost rap years read like a set of liner notes for a Finders Keepers reissue. Thelocal scene, the hair-brained schemes, the friendships, setbacks, dissolutions and reunions. That Finders Keepers have released records sampled by the likes of Jay-Z and Madlib only adds to the sense of coming full circle. It's tempting to read the whole thing as a case of Andy Votel bringing himself back from obscurity. But maybe that's oversimplifying or even over-romanticising something altogether less nostalgic.

"I've never stopped rapping," Votel admits. "I've always been writing for the stages of my life. With me, it comes as part and parcel of buying records."

Although perhaps a little at odds with his image as the arch-druid of cult ephemera cultivated through Finders Keepers, he is unconcerned about what the "mod fraternity or the dyed-in-the-wool psych heads" might say about this flagrant display of vulnerability.

"Do I *care* what other people think?" he asks. One suspects not.

What is striking, however, is just how far the roots of his work in reissues extend back to the sense of collective purpose that he was initiated into in the early 90s.

"For Finders Keepers, I've spent time meeting family or visiting people who are going through really rough times or revisiting eras in life when their dreams were shattered, and I've got to dig this up. You have to treat it with the utmost sensitivity. It isn't a joke – it's someone's life you're meddling with."

In this case, however, it sounds like the original crew didn't exactly need a huge amount of persuading.

"Seeing their fear turn to excitement, hearing it back and going, 'Oh my God, it works!' – that is a human thing, and it's massively genuine," Votel enthuses.

It's a nod of approval for their 17-year-old selves. Andy VOTEL, aka Violator Of The English Language, has been hiding in plain sight all along.

**'Violators Of The English Language' is out now on Hypocritical Beatdown. 'Magnetic Prophecies' by Magnets & Pro-Verbs is out now on Golden Lion Sounds**

# WEIGHT LIFTERS

## YOUNG FATHERS

**Heavy Heavy**

NINJA TUNE

Edinburgh trio Young Fathers have never been inclined to make life easy for their listeners – or for those of us striving to construct a few sentences about them for the general public's perusal. Landmark albums like 'Heavy Heavy' – the first in five years from the Mercury prizewinners (for 2014's 'Dead'), following 2018's acclaimed 'Cocoa Sugar' – usually come accompanied by reams of flowery press notes dissecting meaning down to an atomic level. In this case, though, there's little more than a couple of paragraphs.

Young Fathers – aka Alloysious Massaquoi, Kayus Bankole and Graham "G" Hastings – formed in 2008, and 'Heavy Heavy' marks their fourth studio release. There are a few interpretations of what the album title might mean. It could reflect the grim state of post-Brexit, post-pandemic Britain, still wedded to Tory rule like some Stockholm syndrome sufferer. Perhaps it links to the album's second track and recently released single, 'I Saw', which is seemingly about the blind eye turned to fascist bullying by those too scared to step out of line and into focus. Likewise, it may refer to the added responsibilities that the considerably more grown-up Young Fathers now find heaped on their shoulders. After all, 'Geronimo' does contain the line, "Being a son, brother, uncle, father figure / I gotta survive and provide".

Clearly, not for nothing does Bankole advise us, "You let the demons out and deal with it / Make sense of it after". But the biggest clue lies in the word "soul". It crops up several times in the group's official biography, and if we ignore its more usual, lazy usage – too often merely a byword for any kind of Black influence in music – and bore down to its roots in gospel, there is a clear comparison. Namely, that soul is something felt, not understood. A rapture, a rising ecstasy that's unmistakable, but hard to sum up in words.

'Heavy Heavy' certainly has soul in spades. Opening track 'Rice' paints a picture of a diaspora on the move – "Seven hundred thousand bumpkins on the transit line". The massive chorus explodes, "These hands can heal", sounding as though it's sung by a choir of hundreds. It's sunny, optimistic, and empowering – a surprise, given the raw anger the band are more usually associated with. 'I Saw' follows, and it's a clear shift again, with its distinctly 1970s groove immediately summoning an era of National Front marches in the UK, the similarities with the far right now seeming much closer. After all, when they sing, "Holier than thou / Sunset gremlin / With a snidey wee smile", they could just as easily be describing Nigel Farage as Oswald Mosley.

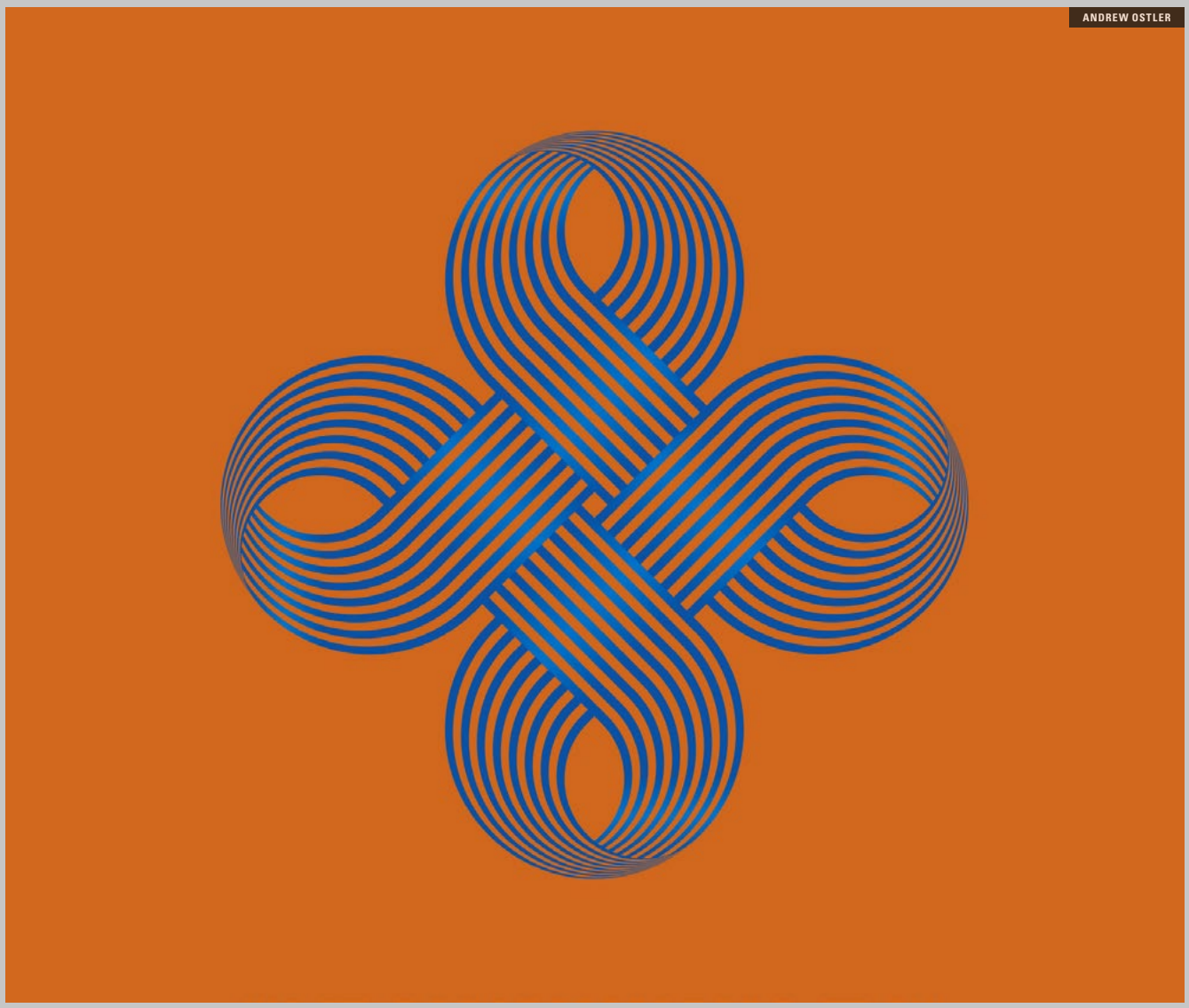
After such considered beginnings, 'Drum' is the first indication of the longer journey we're headed on. Underpinned by tribal hammering, it urges us to get out and dance to the beat, but another voice in the maelstrom is conflicted, declaring with a hint of desperation, "I never claimed to be no role model". 'Tell Somebody' and 'Geronimo' are the eye of the storm. The former consists of almost static orchestration, seemingly frozen in mid-air as mournful falsetto vocals soar above it, while the latter boasts a hip hop beat that feels like a coiled spring, ready to go off. 'Shoot Me Down' marks a move further into the unpredictable with its reverberating sub-bass and mantra-like vocal snippet warning us to "back off". A vocal refrain slowly emerges, pleading "don't shoot me down", and then Native American voices open 'Ululation', a battle cry in a strange foreign tongue set to orchestral bombast.

'Sink Or Swim' follows next at a now frantic pace, handclaps set to a manic tempo as swirling electronics battle with the raw voices of the Fathers themselves. 'Holy Moly' continues the mood at breakneck speed with arguably the album's strongest musical hook – "Holy moly, you've got to take your chance". It starts fast and frenetic, then gets faster and faster, and more and more frantic, until the intensity seems literally unbearable.

'Be Your Lady' closes the album, starting with a single, vulnerable voice and plaintive piano, the tragic hero returning to an old flame after years, willing to throw off his toxic masculinity but simultaneously realising, "All I've got is crazy". It veers from calm to chaotic and then back again, leaving us utterly, utterly spent.

Rest assured, 'Heavy Heavy' is quite a ride. It's not the sound of Young Fathers maturing – it's more than that. It's evidence of their sophisticated ability to shake things up even more violently, and essentially, than before.

**BEN WILLMOTT**




## ANDREW OSTLER
**Four Drones For Saxophone And Modular Synthesizer**
EXPERT SLEEPERS

Excluding two brief one-minute interludes, this album does exactly what it says on the tin. Edinburgh musician Ostler has recorded these tracks as close to "live" as possible, without the use of a laptop, and each performance has been uploaded to YouTube so you can see he's not cheating. The result is a gently lulling record, the saxophone caressing the synth textures to create a deep sonority. At times – like on the nine-minute closer 'Fraxinet' – these pieces are suffused with a stately grandeur, at others, a tender meditative calm. **WS**

## BATTERY OPERATED ORCHESTRA
**We Are Ghosts**
GOTO

Are Battery Operated Orchestra some forgotten 1980s synthpop heroes? It sounds very much so, but in fact they are Sussex duo Brigitte Rose and Chris Black, and 'We Are Ghosts' collates a decade's worth of their output (recorded between 2013-2023) across 17 tracks so cool and collected you can almost see the dry ice. The punky, fizzing 'Service Economy' in particular deserves a shout-out for sticking it to the upper classes – "You don't own me just because I served you what you wanted / You don't own me just because you're rich and you can flaunt it". Irresistible. **CF**

## EARSTONE
**Habitation Incidents 74-84**
STATIC FUSS

Struggling to sleep? For the love of God, don't put this on. Traumatised by a Bristol childhood riddled with paranormal encounters, the intrepid Marcus H attempts closure with a record infused by the spirits of the 1970s Radiophonic Workshop. 'Calls In The Night' is an army of sinister synths marching up the stairs, the magnificently titled 'Beryl, I Heard Violins' a detuned radio broadcasting David Cain-style bleeps. With – tellingly – no violins. And if the hissy entities captured on 'Recorded Your Empty Room' are authentic, it's an alarming ending to an album of disturbing delights. **BF**

## LAIBACH
**Love Is Still Alive**
MUTE

First premiered on an exclusive Electronic Sound seven-inch, 'Love Is Still Alive' is a spin-off from Laibach's 2019 soundtrack to 'Iron Sky – The Coming Race'. Featuring eight tracks that chart the last vestiges of mankind as they escape from the dead Earth and Moon and head for Mars, here we find the wonderfully unfathomable Slovenian avant-garde outfit moving from Johnny Cash-style boom-chuck country ('Moon, Euphoria') to a psychedelic Doors-meets-Suicide organ jam ('Neptune, Oxytocin') and then to mournful, electro-symphonic ambience as they finally arrive at their new home. Perfectly, predictably unpredictable. **MS**

AMBER ARCADES

## AMBER ARCADES
**Barefoot On Diamond Road**
FIRE

This beautifully crafted album of luminous dreampop comes courtesy of Amsterdam singer-songwriter Annelotte De Graaf, aka Amber Arcades. Her "antidote to heartbreak" marries classical orchestration with cosmic electronics and a strong sense of melody, giving much of this release (her third and most accomplished yet) an enveloping baroque-pop edge. With an observational, personal quality that evokes Sally Shapiro or early Saint Etienne, the title track shimmers with symphonic depth, and like the album as a whole, it proves hard to resist. **CG**

## BURIAL GRID
**Music For No Tomorrow**
WERRA FOXMA

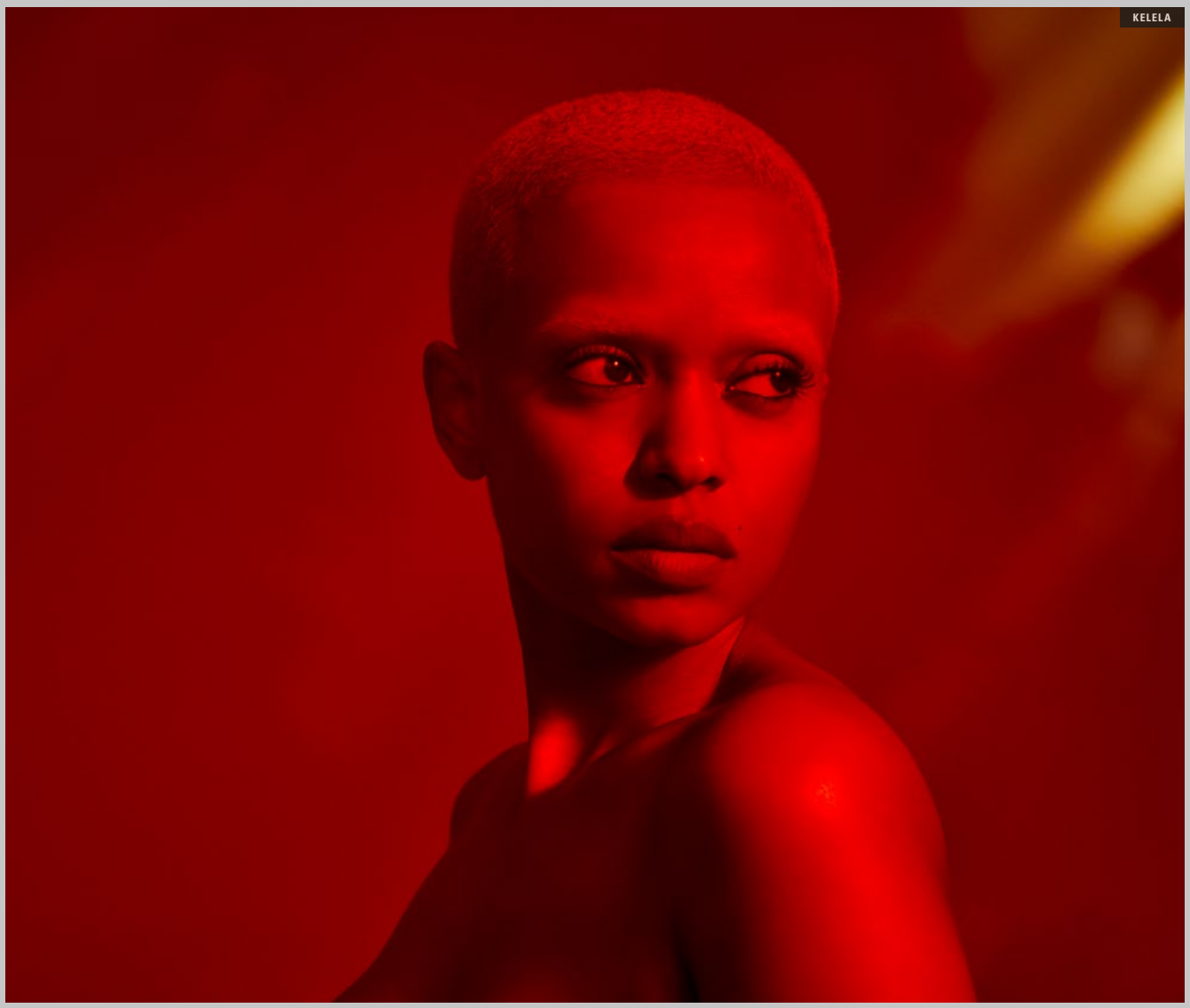
Languishing in some strange corner of Massachusetts, Adam Michael Kozak surrounded himself with "tape machines, dictaphones, broken cell phones and countless acoustic instruments" to create this beautifully fractured collection. The sixth Burial Grid album, it's perhaps the most optimistic. The opener 'Stop Thinking About Tomorrow' is a splendid mishmash of jerky rhythms and analogue bleeps that swells to become joyously anthemic. Elsewhere, 'Asri' sounds like some lost, late 1970s Eno experiment, and the charming 'You're Home, Arturo' is clunky 8-bit heaven with 10cc harmonies. A delight. **BF**

## IBUKUN SUNDAY
**Mantra**
SPIRITUALS

Inspired by the philosophies of the four Vedas, Hinduism's oldest texts, Nigerian sound designer and violist Ibukan Sunday's latest offering is breathtaking in its use of repetition, layering and subliminal patterns. Drawing on a palette that includes field recordings, drones and implied rhythms, it's a subtle invocation of the call-and-response associated with traditional West African music. Highlights are hard to isolate in this astounding set, though the shift in 'Illusion' from suffocating tension to expansive awakening is extra spine-tingling. **MJ**

## HEN OGLEDD
**Bronze**
STREAMLINE

The sense of something interesting about to happen is palpable on 'Bronze'. First released in 2015, this reissue marks the first collaboration between Hen Ogledd's Richard Dawson and Rhodri Davies with vocalist Dawn Bothwell (who is now a permanent member of the Newcastle group along with Sally Pilkington). 'Ancient Data' sounds like someone unpacking an egg whisk and a cuckoo clock onto a trestle table, while standout track 'Amputated Video' clashes and clangs like it was recorded in a haunted car crusher. Wonderfully kooky, expressionistic electronic avant-folk. **ST**


KELELA

## KELELA
**Raven**
WARP

Ravens fly at 25 miles per hour. As a follow-up to American singer-producer Kelela's 2017 debut 'Take Me Apart', this 'Raven' is a more leisurely bird. Dampened electronics meet minimal dembow vibes, with curtains of molten reverb. We're in no rush as Kelela's silken voice – THAT voice – dominates. We can't escape her call, even among the feathery breaks of 'Contact', and the delicious digital edge to the album's liquid bass, like Omar in a Faraday cage. Sumptuous. Five mph max, and we're loving it. **FR**

## EMMANUEL MIEVILLE
**Four Towers And A Bridge**
FORMS OF MINUTIAE

With 'Four Towers And A Bridge', Groupe De Recherches Musicales alumnus Emmanuel Mieville uses field recordings as the basis for contemporary musique concrète pieces, full of macroscopically amplified detail. On 'Tad In Motion', a railway that moves books around the French national library yields a motorised cacophony, while a playfulness envelops 'Ascenseur En Montée' thanks to a squeaking sound that could be someone's shoes slipping along a recently mopped corridor. 'Drips' closes the album with an unadulterated sound – the ubiquitous coo of a pigeon. Intricate and inventive. **MS**

## MARK JENKIN
**Enys Men**
INVADA

A new feature from filmmaker Mark Jenkin is big news. But nowhere in the hype around this folk-horror title about a wildlife researcher working on an uninhabited island off the Cornish coast, however, has it been mentioned that the director himself also created the soundtrack. There's no reliance on classic horror tricks – rather, we get field recordings of the sea and ultra-soft synth sounds ('Enys Pt 1') that slowly disintegrate into less harmonious, more distorted configurations ('Hunros Pt 1', 'Bleujen') as time progresses. Chilling, but in none of the obvious ways. **BW**

## SØS GUNVER RYBERG
**Spine**
ARTERIAL

Danish musician SØS Gunver Ryberg has been somewhat absent since her magnetic contribution to the AD93 label in 2020, and now we can see why – she's been busy crafting a full-length album. Arriving via her own freshly minted Arterial imprint, 'Spine' demonstrates a rebirth from mournful orchestral techno into synthetic ambient IDM creations, delivered at a bracing tempo. The opening track, 'Unfolding', sets both the pace and tone of the release – precise, yet also frayed to perfection, giving echoes of Vladislav Delay's finest innovations. Hair-raising stuff. **FH**

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## SOMEONE
**Owls**
TINY TIGER

Anglo-Dutch artist Tessa Rose Jackson is Someone. 'Owls' is her second album, and it's full of radiant dreampop woven with golden strands of gently psychedelic electronics. Jackson fuses elements of Air, Beach House and Broadcast, and fans of these groups will find plenty to enjoy within this beautifully expansive and often cinematic collection. Standout tracks like 'In Your Arms' or 'I Guess I'm Changing' cast a real spell, suffused as they are with rich tones, warm optimism and alluring mystery. Emotive and engaging throughout. **CG**

## MATTHIAS PUECH
**Mt Hadamard National Park**
HALLOW GROUND

Originally commissioned by Radio France, the five-part 'Mt Hadamard National Park' is an example of what French composer and instrument designer Matthias Puech describes as "audio-naturalist" noise – fusing natural sounds with complex electronics. 'Part 2' is gripped by chaotic sounds that could be heavily processed animal calls. On 'Part 3' we hear ringing, bell-like tones echoing across a vast landscape, while 'Part 5' is perhaps the most dramatic, manipulating recordings of thunder and adding in cicadas, birdsong and heavenly, elegiac synth tones. A brilliant expression of the mutability of nature. **MS**

## MEEMO COMMA
**Loverboy**
PLANET MU

In contrast to the complex conceptual structures of their previous albums, Brighton-born Lara Rix-Martin's third LP in the Meemo Comma guise can be summarised in one four-letter word. Give them an R (for rowdy), A (for 'aving it), V (for vibes) and E (for er – isn't it obvious?) and what have you got? Tunes like 'Loneheath' and 'Bubble Bag' that split the difference between Shut Up And Dance and early Orbital, and would make even Suella Braverman's pupils dilate in delight. **PC**

## LARAAJI
**Segue To Infinity**
NUMERO GROUP

Was it Claude Debussy who said that "music is the space between the notes"? Or was it Eric Morecambe? Either way, whoever it was would definitely be a fan of American musician and new age icon Laraaji. This four-LP boxset combines his 1978 debut album 'Celestial Vibration' with previously unheard material, all of which is so measured and poised that the space between notes feels like an eternity. 'All Pervading' breathes intermittent zither across a slow-moving hubbub. Other tracks such as 'Koto' are more urgent, but no less astounding. One for devotees and newbies alike. **ST**

ELSKAVON

## ELSKAVON
**Origins**
WESTERN VINYL

'Origins' is deliberately titled to suggest Elskavon's latest album is a debut (in fact, it's his 13th). Like shifting from monochrome to technicolor, Minneapolis' Chris Bartels resets his sound palette from post-rock to wide-ranging electronics, from Balearic ('Coastline') to epic and anthemic ('All These Years'). His voice is machine-treated too, smeared across compositions, becoming another instrument in his arsenal. This approach is particularly effective on the beat-driven title track. Kaleidoscopic and masterly, 'Origins' is, hopefully, just the (new) beginning. **AT**

## THE BLACK DOG
**Music For Dead Airports**
DUST SCIENCE

Produced to accompany the re-release of The Black Dog's 2010 classic, 'Music For Real Airports', the four tracks on this mini-album were inspired by Sheffield Airport (in the trio's home town), which closed down last year. It's even bleaker and more foreboding than the original project. 'SHF Is Dead' resembles a baggage carousel grinding towards the abyss, while the electronic requiem of 'ISA DSA' – all eerie drones and sombre tones – seems to ponder profound questions around ideas of the terminal, in more than one sense of the word. **PC**

## BEN FROST
**Broken Spectre**
THE VINYL FACTORY

Part of an artistic investigation into the collapsing Amazonian ecosystem, 'Broken Spectre' sees Iceland-based Australian experimental composer Ben Frost confront a harrowing environmental situation. The album soundtracks an installation by documentary photographer Richard Mosse, and Frost's graphic noisescapes conjure images of a polluted rainforest even when heard independently of Mosse's visual counterpart. 'Broken Spectre' has a surprisingly lighter sonic imprint than Frost's celebrated doomy works. 'The Index' is a good example, with the beauty of the field recordings amplified by the creeping dread of man-made destruction. **FH**

## SNOW GHOSTS
**The Fell**
HOUNDSTOOTH

This spectral, pagan-hued and often spine-tingling album of "old folk songs that were never written" comes from the brilliant minds of Throwing Snow's Hannah Cartwright and Ross Tones, together with keyboard player Oli Knowles. Ranging from the glacial and genuinely unsettling energy of 'Hearths', through to the droning synths of 'Curse' and the emotive swell of 'Vixen', the breadth of captivating moods and tones here is mighty impressive. All told, 'The Fell' sounds simultaneously folkloric and magical, and right on the nature-connected zeitgeist. **CG**

MARLENE RIBEIRO

## MARLENE RIBEIRO
**Toquei No Sol**
ROCKET RECORDINGS

The title of musician and GNOD acolyte Marlene Ribeiro's record translates as 'I Touched The Sun'. Listening to the pieces within, you believe she actually has. The opening track, 'Quatro Palavas', radiates percussive swathes in yellow and green, before 'Forever' and 'What It Is' settle into textures of glistening gold. Like fellow GNOD-ist Alex Macarte, Ribeiro deals in languid ambience. But where Macarte looks to the cosmos, on 'Toquei No Sol' Ribeiro finds an intoxicating earthiness, as though her sound is beamed from the heart of verdant rainforests. **ST**

## SUSSEX TELECOM
**Limited Company**
THIRD KIND

'Limited Company' is the second release by the Sussex Telecom collective, a covert group of like-minded electronic musicians orbiting Brighton's Third Kind imprint. Like their debut, 'Limited Company' inhabits the liminal space occupied by Warp's 'Artificial Intelligence' series. The highlight here is the bass-rich final track, 'Apatheia', which finds Sussex Telecom oscillating between ambient calm and rapidly evolving, fractal-like synth melodies. Elsewhere, 'Incident At Idle Lake' sprays a framework of restless, non-repetitive beats with a pointillistic display of randomised bleeps. Wittingly nostalgic and reverentially retro. **MS**

## NGC 3019
**Dark Cosmonaut**
BANDCAMP

Out there, millions of light years away in the Leo constellation, NGC 3019 is a remote spiral galaxy. On Earth, NGC 3019 is analogue synth maestro and space obsessive Kevin O'Neill of Richmond, Virginia. On this, his 11th release, his explorations of outer space are as stirring and evocative as ever. By turns dynamic (the driving, rubbery arpeggios of 'Cosmonaut Close'), wistful (the sensuous chords of 'Intergalactic') and, in one case, full-on acid ('Dark Matter Without'), 'Dark Cosmonaut' is the soundtrack to the best 1980s horror sci-fi movie you've never seen. **AT**

## KULT KORUTH
**Kult Koruth**
BANDCAMP

It's telling of the Czech experimental scene's humble attitude that this arresting collaboration appears without fanfare, for pay-what-you-like. Modular musician Kult Masek builds hazy ambience through hypnagogic synthwork and field recordings, while painter and visual artist Anna Ruth magics wonderfully dreary false-word vocals under her Koruth alias. 'Pearl Hunters' blends unsettling, brightly lit moods with abstract, detached voices, like Grouper under water, in the sunlight, while Koruth's dirge on 'Pours' nears distorted dark ambient/black metal territory. A powerful pairing. **FH**

LIZZY YOUNG

## LIZZY YOUNG
**Not That Bad**
AGFY

'Not That Bad' is described by Brooklyn's Lizzy Young as "my love letter to anyone who identifies as a woman", but that shouldn't discourage any potential listeners of the male variety. Young's bedroom-produced electropop may be delivered with a deadpan expression, but the likes of 'Taxbreak Heartache' and 'Woman Hotdog' have a sense of humour lurking not far from the surface. The Charli XCX-meets-Suicide grind of 'Cigarettes Are Good For Pain' might be the best thing here, but the sprawling, impressionistic 'Felicette', while hugely different, is equally mighty. Not that bad at all. **BW**

## RYAN SHIRLOW
**Ullstair University – Vol 1**
WOODFORD HALSE

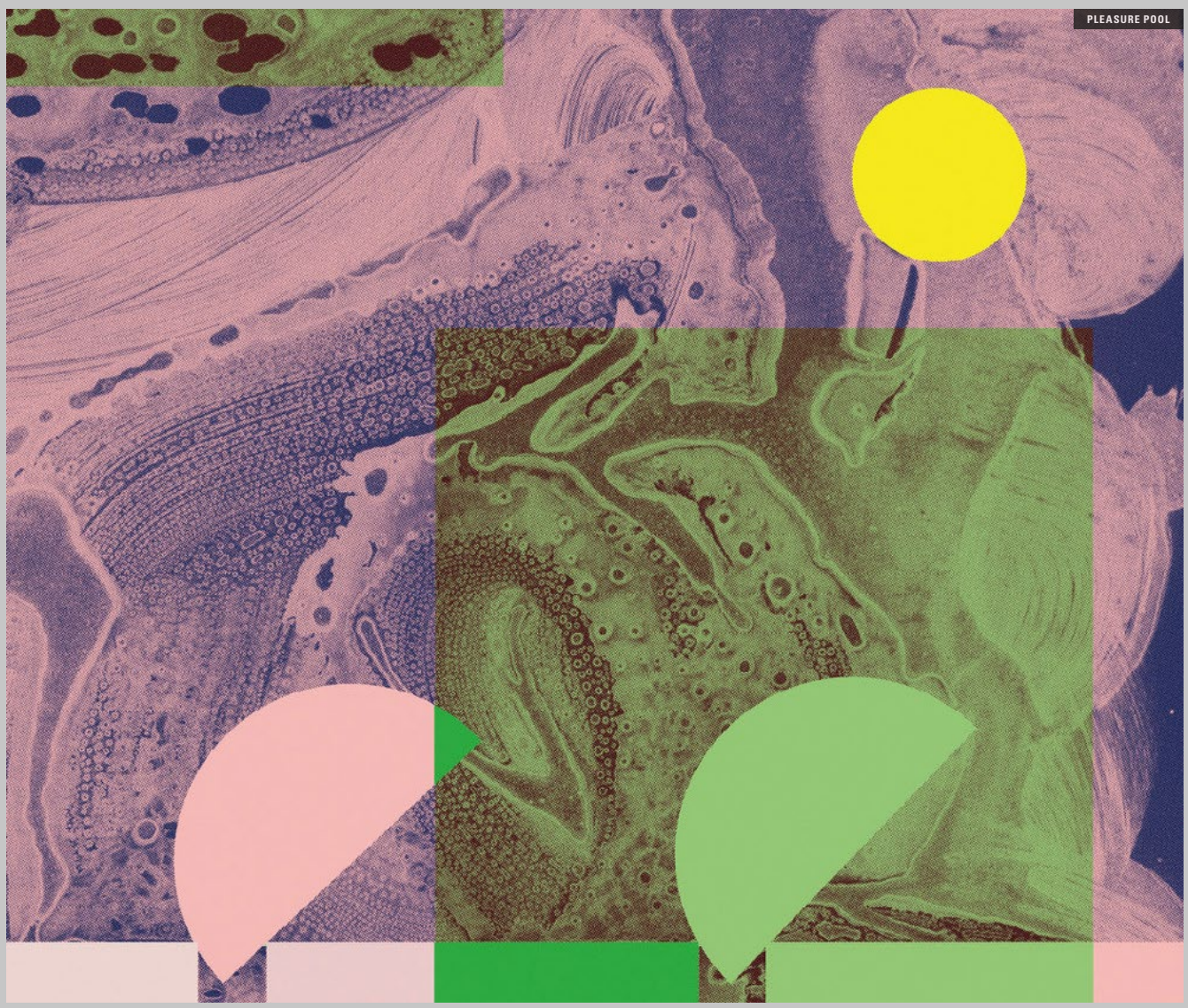
"Ullstair University was a centre for esoteric further education, located above the basalt northern coast of a Parallel Ireland of 1987." So begins the unlikely backstory to an album of sumptuously spooky folktronica. There are two seamless suites, both reputedly the reconstruction of occult-based recordings uncovered during asbestos removal. After the wistful Mellotron of 'Enter The Archive, Praise #1', we're swept along by mournful mandolins, lap fiddles and echoing footsteps to the anthemic synths of 'Ascension / Fade Out'. Great stuff – think Mike Oldfield lurking on the Giant's Causeway. **BF**

## THE SISTERHOOD
**Gift**
CADIZ / MERCIFUL RELEASE

A well overdue reissue, this. Recorded by goth overlord Andrew Eldritch in 1986 (beating his former Sisters Of Mercy bandmates to the punch by using the Sisterhood name), 'Gift' was a bridge between the Sisters' defining 1985 debut 'First And Last And Always' and the commercial peak of 1987's glossy 'Floodland' album. Eschewing guitars, the brooding electronics and mechanised beats here chug with nefarious intent. Melodramatic opener 'Jihad' is all nagging bass and resounding synthetic clatter, while 'Rain From Heaven' channels funereal/ecclesiastical vibes in gloriously inimitable fashion. Praise be. **VI**

## RICHARD NORRIS
**Deep Listening 2019-2022**
GROUP MIND

With 'Deep Listening 2019-2022', Beyond The Wizard's Sleeve and Grid man Richard Norris collects 20 slow-moving driftscapes initially released via Inner Mind/Group Mind. On 'Eighty Eight' and 'December', Norris washes calming piano motifs across new age-inflected synths, inviting a meditative plunge into their azure blues. As things progress the ambience distends, unfurling into more much cosmic territory like the spiral of distant galaxies. Like most of his projects – but particularly the 'Music For Healing' series – there's a deeply therapeutic feel to these touching pieces. **ST**




## PLEASURE POOL
**Love Without Illusion**
OPTIMO MUSIC

This debut album from Finn O'Hare, Andrew Robertson and a loose collective of Glaswegian artists and musicians is ripe with the spirit of the sunlit era when acid house sunk its teeth into British culture. Making fulsome use of dub effects, cowbells, itchy synth lines and addictive percussion, these eight tracks unfold like a particularly louche all-night afterparty. 'Lick The Bag' represents the irresistibly silly peak, and the strung-out title track the moment when the sun squints through the blinds. Imagine LCD Soundsystem minus the irony, or a treasure trove of lost Weatherall remixes. Yeah, that good. **WS**

## COIL
**Queens Of The Circulating Library**
DAIS

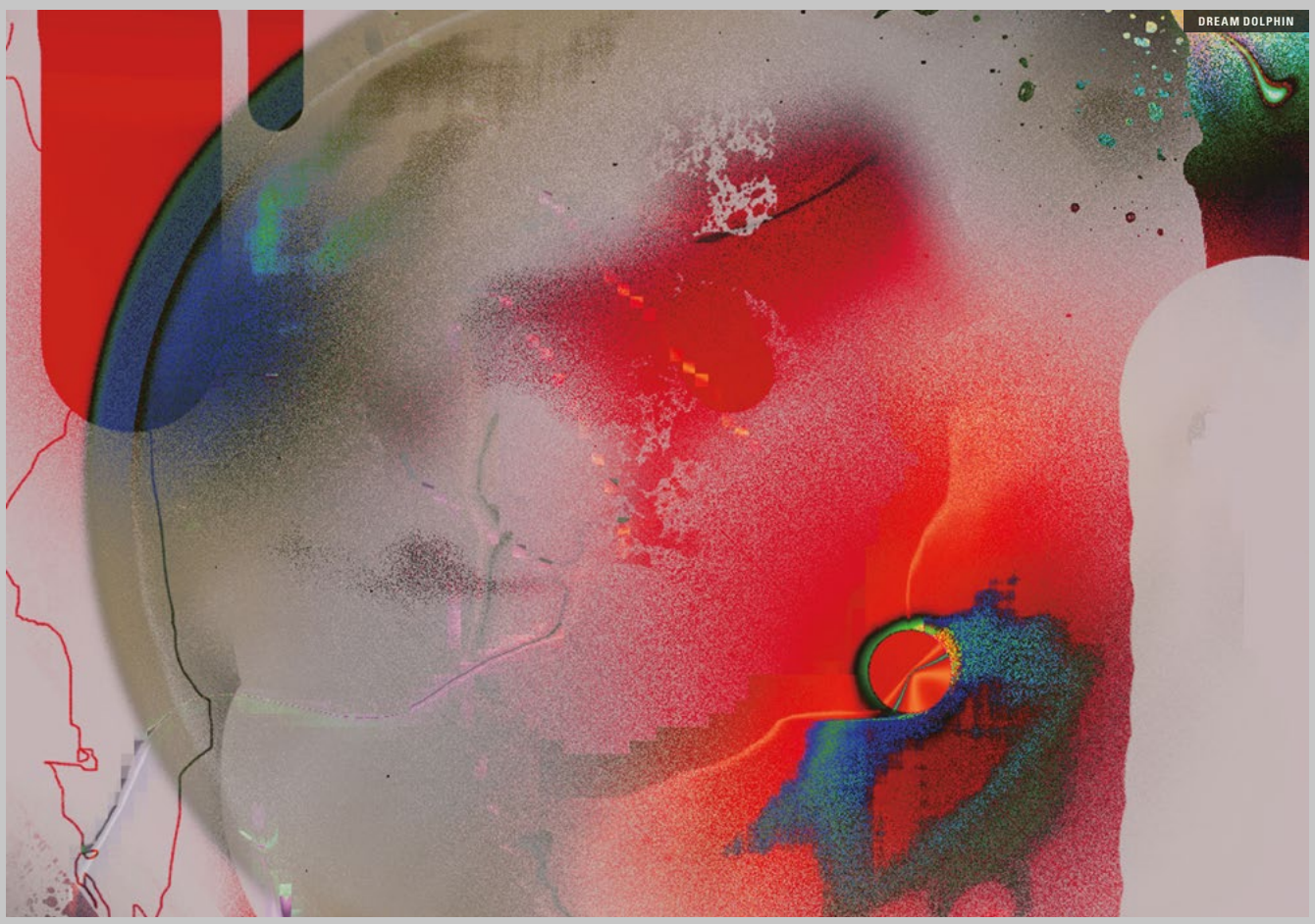
Originally released by Coil's Eskaton imprint in 2000 and now receiving its first vinyl pressing, 'Queens Of The Circulating Library' was one of the group's only releases not to involve Peter "Sleazy" Christopherson. Recorded by John Balance and Thighpaulsandra, with an opening monologue from Dorothy Lewis (the latter's octogenarian mother), the single 50-minute track sees the group at arguably their most minimal. A central drone fluctuates between the sinister and ethereal, while the sculpted ambience and lysergic, mind-altering resonance makes 'Queens Of The Circulating Library' a classic Coil offering. **MS**

## KING AYISOBA
**Work Hard**
GLITTERBEAT

Ghanaian kologo guru King Ayisoba is back with another bracing collection of prescriptive dance tracks that exemplify his work ethic. Ayisoba puts the manic into shamanic with his own spin on the hip-life style on songs like 'Good Things God Knows'. His accomplice Zea takes on a curatorial role as well as mixing, adding touches of vocoder here and squelchy synths there, and giving the likes of 'Bossi Labome' a modern edge. The marriage of contemporary and traditional is knitted together perfectly thanks to King Ayisoba's delightfully gruff irrepressibility. **JA**

## AWOO
**Awoo**
BCAASYSTEM

Bilej Kluk, a member of Prague's BCAAsystem arts collective, morphs into new alias AWOO via this confounding debut album co-produced with SHAPE+ alumnus Oliver Torr. Across a trio of music videos rendered in the Unreal Engine 5 animation software by artist RealityCongress, AWOO enters a vivid fictional universe. His breathily indistinct trap lyrics combine with omnivorous musical influences, from screamo and cloud rap to avant-club sound design. The optimistic beat of 'Fire Last Krohova' in particular adds trance, breakbeat, and traces of hyperpop to the futuristic formula. **FH**




## DREAM DOLPHIN

**Gaia: Selected Ambient & Downtempo Works (1996-2003)**

MUSIC FROM MEMORY

Between 1996 and 2003, the Japanese musician Noriko released 20 albums under the moniker Dream Dolphin. Her work meets at the junction between Jon Hassell and The Orb, plunging aspects of various ethnic musics into ambient house. In fact, tracks such as 'Healing Moon – Tsuki No Iyashi Umi No Mahou' and 'Daichi No Uta' recall Paterson and Cauty if, rather than adventuring beyond the Ultraworld, they'd journeyed beyond the "fourth world".

Noriko takes Hassell's idea of music for unknown and imaginary regions – which first crystallised on his album with Brian Eno, 'Fourth World Vol 1: Possible Musics' – and sublimates it within a more polished, late 1990s framework. That said, her pieces retain a sense of exoticism – 'Voyage (Dive To The Future Sight)' sends volleys of nautical synth trumpeting across shoals of choral voices, while 'Island Humming' surrounds chirruping birdsong with beatific vocals and chill-out percussion, merging the lines between earthiness and futuristic electronics. Sublime. **ST**

## ACID ARAB

**٣**

CRAMMED DISCS

'٣' (or 'Trois') is a welcome return from Paris' premier North African-influenced electro outfit Acid Arab. Starting out as a DJ duo 10 years ago, Guido Minisky and Hervé Carvalho have grown their enterprise into a five-piece band, boosting their sound in the live arena and on record too. 2019's 'Jdid' lost some of the buoyancy of their 2016 debut 'Musique De France', but thankfully on this, their third long-player, they've not only got the sonic balance right, they've also brought in a host of celebrated guest singers for each track to up the ante.

Long-time collaborator Sofiane Saidi leads the way on opener 'Leila', bringing his deep whisper to a banger that positively buzzes, replete with interweaving instruments grounded to a hard groove. Rising chanteuse Ghizlane Melih contributes welcome melisma to the Anatolian funk trance of 'Habaytak'. And listeners might do a double-take at the sight of the name Rachid Taha on 'Rachid Trip' – the atmospheric techno collaboration from beyond the grave came from a close association with the late Algerian singer, who ad-libbed into an iPhone one night in Paris before his death. The stars have aligned on '٣', including the fallen ones. **JA**

## KHOTIN

**Release Spirit**

GHOSTLY INTERNATIONAL

Dylan Khotin-Foote's new album begins with a recording from Happy Valley. That's the place in British Columbia where he recently took a family holiday, not the police crime drama. Indeed, the atmosphere of 'Release Spirit' could hardly be more different to stories of guilty consciences under dour Yorkshire skies, telling instead a tale of youthful innocence on balmy summer days through evanescent downtempo reminiscent of Future Loop Foundation.

Produced after a move from Vancouver back to his childhood home in Edmonton, Khotin-Foote has slowed the already somnambulant pace of his previous output down even further here. The beat of 'Techno Creep' seems to be wading through syrup, with sweet and sugary also very much the flavour of the new agey 'Life Mask' and the marshmallow-soft synth pads of 'My Same Size'. The album title and the whispering voices throughout might suggest a hauntological hue, but the spirit Khotin has released is as cute as Casper The Friendly Ghost. **PC**

FIONA SOE PAING

## FIONA SOE PAING
**Sand, Silt, Flint**
COLLIDERSCOPE

'Sand, Silt, Flint' finds Aberdeen's Fiona Soe Paing reinterpreting the old ballads of North East Scotland, surrounding her distinctive voice and electronics with cello, fiddle, harp, clarinet, drums and guitar. These are songs that tell vivid stories, of lovers, feuds, people and places. Myriad histories, passed down through song.

Paing's versions occupy a space somewhere between mournfulness and wistfulness. 'The Ballad Of John Hosie' details a 'Romeo And Juliet' tale of love and death, led by an electronic bass pulse and melodic charm that frames the anguish and despair faced by its characters.

Elsewhere, 'Fisher's Lullaby' would have historically been sung by the wives of fishermen to hasten their husbands back to shore, and here it carries a sweetness and poignancy through Paing's many-layered arrangements. This is folk music given a completely new lease of life, and like recent works from Erland Cooper and Arun Sood, it does much to preserve the sense of tradition and storytelling that's so vital to Scottish culture. A wonderful, stirring album. **MS**

## NEW AGE DOOM & LEE "SCRATCH" PERRY
**Remix The Universe**
WE ARE BUSY BODIES

The genius of Lee "Scratch" Perry is without question. The legendary Jamaican producer did however have a propensity for paid guest appearances (that probably even he never listened to) leading to the occasional substandard venture bearing his name.

So it would have been understandable, when hearing about his final collaboration with New Age Doom, to exclaim, "New Age Who?". But the percussive Canadian electronic noise duo are more than worthy keepers of the flame. 'Lee "Scratch" Perry's Guide To The Universe' was a majestic denouement befitting the legendary Upsetter, but fortunately there's more.

Part of the original project's success was the input of collaborators such as saxophonist Donny "Blackstar" McCaslin, so for 'Remix The Universe', it made sense to bring in other artists to reimagine that album. Members of Death Grips, Glassjaw and BLK JKS tackle these songs, which are not dub per se but rather the embodiment of the immense influence dub has had on alternative music. Which means musicians like Andy Morin get to give back to the master on 'Life Is An Experiment', feeding the delay loop into infinity in glorious homage. **JA**

## PLANK
**Future Of The Sea**
GOLDEN LION SOUNDS

This ode to our imperious oceans and their current state of man-induced fragility is Yorkshire/Lancashire border country trio Plank's first album in eight years. 'Future Of The Sea' brings to a conclusion an essential, nature-inspired trilogy that began with 2012's kosmische-hued 'Animalism'. Channelling their love of pioneering instrumentalists Harmonia, Tortoise and 1970s concept-album prog acts like Camel, Plank brilliantly explore the liminal zone that blurs driving post-rock (think Mogwai or Explosions In The Sky) and star-bound vintage German electronic experimentalism.

The propulsive and exuberant analogue synth-led 'Red Tide' gets all this bang-on, spectacularly capturing the essence of dynamic elemental majesty. Elsewhere, particularly on the sprawling, episodic 16-minute odyssey 'Breaking Waves', there's a breathtaking, slightly bonkers cinematic quality to revel in, evoking Vangelis or even John Carpenter. Surging like the veritable tempest, it careers through extended moments of wild stoner-rock wigouts and serene, light-filled ambient explorations that are as awe-inspiring and unpredictable as the sea itself. **CG**

HIFI SEAN & DAVID MCALMONT

## HIFI SEAN & DAVID MCALMONT
**Happy Ending**
ROUGH TRADE

How do you follow an album that featured Yoko Ono, Fred Schneider of The B-52's, house legends Paris Grey and Crystal Waters, and the last recording session of Suicide's Alan Vega? For Hifi Sean (formerly of The Soup Dragons/The High Fidelity), "keep focused" would appear to be the response. Well, keep focused *and* keep dancing. One of the highlights of Sean's 2016 album 'Ft.' was the finger-snapping cosmic disco of 'Like Josephine Baker', which featured the operatic croon of David McAlmont, responsible for the melodramatic vocal swoops on McAlmont & Butler's mid-90s indie classic 'Yes'.

Clearly, Hifi Sean remains someone who knows a good thing when he hears it. And so, fantastically, we have a whole album of excellent sounds. 'All In The World' is a part-house/part-disco/all-partying stunner, 'The Skin I'm In' is simultaneously louche and soulful, and the muscular breakbeat of 'Maybe' complements a song of self-empowerment that contemptuously unpicks a broken relationship. 'Happy Ending' is giddy, reckless and seductive as hell. History tells us that anything this dangerously fun is bound to get banned. Rush before it's too late. **AT**

## VARIOUS ARTISTS
**Portals**
OTHER PEOPLE

Seven artists – Becca Lilia, brz, mrsebs, Neyva, Romeo Diablos, Umbra Abra and VORA – decided to create a monument to their time on a two-month long programme organised by Nicolás Jaar's Other People label in Los Angeles. Featuring solo and collaborative tracks from all of the artists (including one with Jaar himself), 'Portals' is the result.

Rooted in electronics, there's a gorgeous variety here, from VORA's smoking acid house doozy 'The Room Is Only As Small As Your Imagination', to the freeform industrial aggro of 'Hay K Morir' by Romeo Diablos. Puerto Rican producer and composer mrsebs provides another highlight with '0t0nes', which starts like a mellow Orbital cover of 'Popcorn' before settling into some languid Latin-tinged house groove.

Anyone with a taste for the punkier end of electronica will love Becca Lilia's claustrophobic yet sophisticated gabba affair 'Visual Fighter', but there are plenty of less blasting productions here to balance it out. 'Portals' is a door that opens onto impressive new names and sounds. **BW**

## OTTO SIDHARTA
**Kajang**
SUB ROSA

Active since the 1970s, Otto Sidharta's approach to electronic sound draws deeply on Indonesia's traditional musics, especially those – like that of the Kajang tribe on the island of Sulawesi – that are wilfully unplugged from the rest of the world. For Sidharta, this isolates a powerful purity, something without external influence or modernist infiltrations.

'Kajang' consists of four long pieces, each constructed with recordings that coil around one another to allow microtonal patterns to develop. As a composer, Sidharta is adept at the art of subtlety. On the title track, aside from constructing the central, undulating drone, his interventions are relatively minimal – a fluttering electronic pulse, a metallic distortion effect – but nothing that detracts from the power of that core frequency.

'Kerrikil' uses sounds slowed down to a glacial pace, creating a vague outline of a melody that unfolds gracefully and meditatively, surrounded by clusters of percussive noises and watery tones that shimmer with a millpond-like tranquility. Atmospheric and engaging. **MS**

**FREE LOVE**
**Inside**
LOST MAP

All hail the new synthpop royalty

Few acts seem better-placed right now to assume the throne as new monarchs of left-field electronics than Glasgow duo Free Love. The artists formerly known as Happy Meals have been big figures on their hometown's cross-pollinating DIY scene for quite some time, partly as a result of the reputation of their euphoric, rapturously delivered live shows. Since the release of their acclaimed 2018 EP 'Luxury Hits', and an even bigger accomplishment in the birth of their son Echo in the summer of 2022, husband and wife team Suzi and Lewis Cook really do seem to have it all down.

The cosmic, technicoloured sensuousness of 'Inside' is pretty much the embodiment of everything anyone could desire from modern synthpop. Ten tracks of lysergic effervescence are beautifully balanced with all the good stuff, from acid-flecked, sophisticated Italo-disco or hi-NRG adrenalin, to celestial bliss and transcendental poise. And though the 20th century touchstones (early Depeche Mode and The Human League, for sure) are all here, they're carried with easy guile and sculpted into something startlingly fresh.

The opener, 'Le Mirage', sets the tone, its glossy europop palette building alongside French lyrics delivered by Suzi Cook as if singing in her mother tongue, channelling breathy, nostalgic Gallic allure. The lead single, 'Open The Door', is a bona fide belter, though. Carrying subtle nods to the underground electronics of Throbbing Gristle (think '20 Jazz Funk Greats' era), but firing them through a glittering prism of light that even manages to weave a bit of Yellow Magic Orchestra into its electrifying pop-savvy exuberance, it's a track that will stay with you all day.

Elsewhere, the squelching but downtempo 'Fight Or Flight' – about misplaced relationship trust and the feeling of liberation that comes with cutting ties – is unexpectedly affecting, while 'All The Same To Me' subtly nods to early house master Lil' Louis.

And towards the album's close, luminous numbers like 'It's A Feeling' have a cerebral depth reinforcing the feeling that you've been listening to something with real gravitas. "I hope this never ends," sings Suzi, referencing those moments when you realise you're moving on from something, but also reflecting your own sentiments too. Revel in this one folks – you might not enjoy anything quite so much all year.

**CARL GRIFFIN**

# Brief Encounters

Glasgow's Free Love couple, **Suzi** and **Lewis Cook**, team up for our quick-fire questions

**Hello Free Love, where are you right now and what can you see?**
Suzi: "Sitting in our living room. I can see our son, Echo, asleep in his little chair. We live at the top of a hill. Out the window I can see pretty much all of Glasgow, and in the distance, the snow-capped hills of Loch Lomond."
**You used to be called Happy Meals – why the name change? Did you get a writ from a fast-food joint?**
Suzi: "The word was Ronald was hot on our trail. We also just really love the idea of constantly reinventing ourselves."
**Free Love is an interesting band name for a married couple, isn't it?**
Suzi: "What is love if it isn't free? Neither of us owns the other."
**You've released records on a holy trinity of Scottish labels – Night School, Optimo and now Johnny Lynch's Lost Maps. Which is your favourite?**
Lewis: "Ha-ha! Any answer I give here is going to sound like I'm trying to be diplomatic. They're all mad cunts who spend their time and energy putting love and light into the world through their work, and that's why we wanted to work with them."
**In 2018 you released an EP after taking part in Johnny Lynch's 'Visitations' residency on the Isle Of Eigg. Tell us about Eigg?**
Lewis: "It's a wee island in the Hebrides. Johnny invited us to stay in this little Scandi space pod and in return we appeased the gods of the land with an EP of solid gold tracks about getting abducted by aliens."
**It was the start of a beautiful friendship, wasn't it?**
Suzi: "It was! Johnny became our Dalai Lama."
**You talk about making music during lockdown as "an essential ritualistic part of our daily existence". That sounds serious…**
Lewis: "Naw, it's making sounds and turning them into songs – life is but a dream. It's important but it's not serious. Making music is like a little prayer – you don't have to do it or believe it's going to be received, but sometimes the act of dedication is a reward in itself."
**There's a track on the album, 'Open The Door', that deals with "recognising you're not the only person wondering what's going on". Care to expand on that?**
Suzi: "Everybody shouts when they don't know what to say. That's where we all are."
**The artwork for the new album… is that a cash and carry?**
Suzi: "It's a big Tesco bulk-buy isle. We were talking about pregnancy and about how it's one of the craziest and weirdest things a person can do, but also completely mundane at the same time. And so we wanted to capture a bit of that sentiment."
**And how's parenthood treating you?**
Lewis: "It is magic. Extreme, colourful and beautiful."
**Echo is a great name. What else was on your list in case any of our readers need ideas?**
Lewis: "Flanger, MS-20 and Eigg."

# Buried Treasure

## EYELESS IN GAZA

**Photographs As Memories**

CHERRY RED, 1981

When you think about Nuneaton – assuming you make a habit of pondering Warwickshire market towns – your brain may conjure up images of leafy parks, historic buildings or perhaps the bucolic works of seminal author George Eliot, who was born there.

It turns out that for over 40 years, little old Nuneaton has been harbouring something a bit darker, something distinctly spine-chilling… and I'm not talking about the Attleborough bypass.

Eyeless In Gaza were formed in Nuneaton in 1980 by hospital worker Martyn Bates and lab assistant Pete Becker. The intense and sinister nature of their music means that retrospectively, the duo are often lumped in with the post-punk crowd, but in reality their output was extraordinarily multifarious, encompassing both introspective synthesiser collages and violent, guitar-driven thrashes.

Nowhere is this more evident than on 'Photographs As Memories', the duo's debut album, where on some tracks you will hear brashly experimental overtones undercut by wailing organs ('Seven Years', 'Knives Replace Air'), and on others meandering, pretty synthesiser patterns pockmarked by the sharp bursts of Bates' caterwauling vocals ('Speech Rapid Fire', 'No Noise').

There is a rawness and brutality to the proceedings, and as a result 'Photographs As Memories' is not the most accessible of albums – although considering every track was recorded in one take with no overdubs, this is hardly a surprise.

What is surprising though, is just how many examples of unbridled beauty there are. Slivers of brittle splendour are waiting to be found if you allow the untamed raggedness of the rest of the album to engulf you. 'Fixation' provides one such moment, with Becker's Wasp synth niftily fizzling away throughout, as does 'From A To B', which is all gloomy charm.

Interestingly, the name Eyeless In Gaza is taken from the title of a 1936 Aldous Huxley novel, notable for the fact that its chapters do not appear in chronological order. Sometimes this is what listening to 'Photographs As Memories' feels like – as if someone has taken the album and given it a vicious shake, just to see what the finished product will sound like.

Somehow this approach worked, and indeed it continued to work on a further five Eyeless In Gaza long-players released before the duo went on hiatus in 1987. By 1993 they were recording again, although this time around their music was distinctly gentler and more tranquil – the kind you might associate with a stroll through the quaint streets of a market town. Nuneaton, perhaps?

**IMOGEN BEBB**

## JOHN CALE

**Mercy**

DOUBLE SIX/DOMINO

### Masterful electronic meditations

After six decades, just how does John Cale remain so peculiarly unbound? From The Velvet Underground's noise drone of the 1960s to the chamber pop of 'Paris 1919', to producing The Stooges, Patti Smith and Happy Mondays, to the electropop of 'Wrong Way Up' and the clang of 2016's 'M:FANS', he remains almost unparalleled in his restless exploration of song and sound form.

But even someone of Cale's stature has to toe the line sometime, right? At 80, precedent dictates that he should be making the stark mortality album like all the greats, from Johnny Cash to Leonard Cohen. Hell, even David Bowie succumbed to its irresistible charms, albeit with a distinctly jazz edge.

Instead, steadfast, Cale refuses temptation. He even rejects the obvious alternative, espoused by his fellow countryman Dylan Thomas, to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light". Instead, 'Mercy' is a record of contemplation, quiet resistance and subtle questioning of society. It's shot through with a bedrock of electronics – particularly intoxicating reverb and the 808 – that sounds simultaneously lavish and understated, both modern and classic.

Cale's knack for collaboration – see his brilliant turn on Kelly Lee Owens' 2020 track 'Corner Of My Sky' – is further underscored here. On the first single, 'Story Of Blood', a bar-room piano gives way to glacial synth chords and stuttering hi-hats as Cale and Weyes Blood's Natalie Mering weave and entwine vocals like the smoke from two lovers' cigarettes. Elsewhere, Wolverhampton-born electronic artist Actress brings icy electronic minimalism to the 4am fever dream 'Marilyn Monroe's Legs', while Amelia Meath of Sylvan Esso is Cale's forlornly wailing foil amid fizzing percussion on 'Time Stands Still'. Animal Collective compete with tumbling drums on 'Everlasting Days', and Cale has somehow tamed and boxed the insolent vocals of Lias Saoudi (Fat White Family) on 'The Legal Status Of Ice'.

The final track, 'Jump Out The Window', stands alone. Its yearning plea to prevent a companion's suicide is as close to Dylan Thomas' "rage" as he gets. Meanwhile, Cale bashes out staccato piano chords with an intensity that suggests he's trying to free a lost soul trapped in its ivory keys. Ironically for a man whose most famous band was named after a book about bondage, John Cale remains exhilaratingly, singularly free.

**ANTHONY THORNTON**

## POLYPORES
**Praedormitium**
CASTLES IN SPACE

Out walking one Christmas Day, Lancashire producer Stephen James Buckley was overcome by the beauty of the rime-coated lichen he encountered, and immediately set to work on the album opener, 'Frost And Moss'. He probably missed out on a second helping of sprouts, but the resulting track is the perfect encapsulation of those white-skied winter mornings, when village pavements sparkle and hot breath hangs silently in the air. Ever the modular maestro, Buckley even somehow coaxes mournful woodwind solos from the tangle of cables snaking around his Christmas tree.

'Praedormitium' itself is the transitional state between wakefulness and sleeping, and Buckley positions this delightfully wintry opus firmly within the fuzzy hinterland of the half-asleep. 'Growing Crystals' is a dream of childhood music boxes, 'Kaleidoscope' a creaking bedroom door beneath the rhythmic breaths of a snoozing synth. If Buckley really needs to be nodding off to produce work of such fragile beauty, let's hope he's got a plentiful supply of Nytol and cocoa powder on his bedside table. **BF**

## MIOCLONO
**Cluster I**
HIVERN DISCS

A brace of Barcelona producers unite. Oriol Riverola brings instincts for endorphin-imbued house music, as ably demonstrated under his alter ego John Talabot, while Arnau Obiols serves up the tribalism of his Velmondo project. As the duo Mioclono, the result is a blinking dashboard of tick-tock electronics, which would be metronomic if it wasn't for the teasing, jazzy percussion that slowly comes to dominate the record. We go from percussive clinks as dapples of colour, to the tropical urgency of 'Birth Of A Robot', in which a wobbleboard goes to war with gleefully tumbling toms.

The album is inspired by the pair's experience with epilepsy and myoclonus, the latter being the medical term for involuntary twitches. Things do feel almost anatomical, the ambient dub pumping like a heart from start to finish. Yet there are no hiccups here, especially when the insistent rhythmic rolls of 'Fig And Fire' rise through bodily gasps and reedy electronic mating calls, across a rather breathtaking 16 minutes. **FR**

## ALEXANDER TUCKER & KEITH COLLINS
**Fifth Continent**
SUBTEXT RECORDINGS

Alexander Tucker became friends with Keith Collins following a chance encounter on the beach at Dungeness in the late 1990s. Collins, the spiritual partner of Derek Jarman during his later years, and Tucker went on to work together on 'Between The Ears: More Than A Desert' for BBC Radio in 2014, featuring recordings of Jarman's memoir 'Modern Nature' set to music.

The wonderfully windswept collaboration 'Fifth Continent' came together thanks to Collins' husband Garry Clayton, who invited Tucker to Prospect Cottage to explore Collins' archive after his death and record in Jarman's old writing room. Cellos, trumpet drones, musique concrète and the ticking clock – a haunting motif – are skillfully woven into tapestries of Collins' voice. On 'At Dungeness', he speaks movingly into his portable field recorder about coming to terms with the death of his friend.

An accompanying anthology, 'Fifth Quarter', features contributions from Simon Fisher Turner and Stephen O'Malley, among others. The album itself is a beautiful meditation on life, death and everything in between. **JA**

LISEL

## LISEL
**Patterns For Auto-Tuned Voices And Delay**
BA DA BING

Naming her album with a title that evokes the work of pioneering minimalists Terry Riley or John Cage, Los Angeles vocal artist Eliza Bagg (aka Lisel) follows a trajectory that, if her CV is anything to go by, must come very naturally. Having already worked with the likes of John Zorn, Julianna Barwick, Tim Hecker and the New York Philharmonic, this classically trained opera singer appears to straddle with ease the parallel musical worlds of traditional classical and avant-garde experimentalism.

As adept at singing Renaissance and Baroque period works as she is at interpreting modern-day neoclassicists like Steve Reich or Philip Glass, Bagg has crafted a stunning album that combines her virtuoso voice with contemporary digital effects in a perfect marriage of the expressively human and the startlingly machine-driven.

Pushing at the boundaries while maintaining an impressive melodic focus throughout, we hear surely the fullest possible potential of the human voice on outstanding pieces like the hypnotic 'Polyphony For Voices' or the glimmering, layered tapestry that is 'Rising Mist'. Impressive. **CG**

## VARIOUS ARTISTS
**From Above Vol 3**
LUMIÈRE NOIRE

Chloé Thévenin is one of those French producers who has inexplicably flown under the radar for much of the last decade or so, while her more famous compatriots have snaffled Grammys. This, the third sampler from her Lumière Noire label, shows that in addition to being a brilliant producer, she's also an exquisite tastemaker. Open-minded too – there's everything here from minimal techno (Rodion's 'Mondi Lontanissimi') to oblique electronica (Damien Vandesande's 'Star Glide') and Japanese electropop (Vega Voga's 'Gradus Ad Parnassum').

That said, a number of the best tracks evoke memories of the hairspray-scented days of the early 2000s, when electroclash freshened up mainstream dance music. 'Silk Pistol' by CAR is a wonderfully po-faced piece of nonsense, while Justine Forever's 'Viral' is intoned in gorgeously breathy French. But above all else, what links these tracks is their sheer quality. Time for Lumière Noire – and Thévenin – to step into the spotlight. **WS**

## FLEXAGON
**The Towers I: Inaccessible**
DISCO GECKO

With touching sensitivity, the enigmatic Flexagon pays homage to the forgotten places of his native Guernsey. His 2020 album '7 Nocturnes East' was an evocation of the coastline's nighttime noises. Now we have the first of a trilogy exploring the island's assorted towers and tall buildings. "A brutalist wartime observation tower, a windmill, a clock tower, trees used as lookout posts by German soldiers during the occupation…" It's gorgeous.

While 'Ozanne Tower: The Folly' combines Badalamenti strings and a mournful cor anglais, 'The Last Trees' is a shimmering electronic hymnal. And 'Loophole Tower No 10' is a lament for the island's Napoleonic sea defences, written by journalist Shaun Shackleton and told partly from the perspective of a press-ganged 19th century watchman. "I curse those *baiseurs*, the bloody militia / Who drag me away from my hearthside, my table, my woman, my blanket / To this granite birdcage". The fate of that historic tower in 2023? "Drunkless, dog-pissed and butterfly-kissed." It is the keystone of an album steeped in the loneliness of landscape. **BF**

## KALI MALONE

**Does Spring Hide Its Joy**

IDEOLOGIC ORGAN

### Epic, temporal drone excursions

Over the last few years, innovative Nordic organists, including the likes of Ellen Arkbro and Anna Von Hausswolff, have enjoyed a deserved surge in popularity. Stockholm-based Kali Malone has been instrumental in the swell itself, with solo albums such as 2019's 'The Sacrificial Code' elevating her to a position of reverence among those who enjoy their music sitting still on church pews with eyes closed (sometimes for long enough for their arse to go numb).

Leaving the organ's drone for a suite of tuned sine wave oscillators, Malone's 'Does Spring Hide Its Joy' features a holy trinity of co-conspirators, with Stephen O'Malley of Sunn O))) on electric guitar, alongside lauded cellist Lucy Railton.

No longer location-bound by noteworthy organs to churches or cathedrals, the trio have been performing 'Does Spring Hide Its Joy' in sound art institutions (with perhaps comfier seating) throughout Europe and the US – the album itself blends recordings of in-situ performances at MONOM and Funkhaus in Berlin to recreate the live experience. The vinyl edition is 60 minutes long, while the digital and CD versions expand the album to a staggering three-hour dive.

Maximal in duration, minimalist in spirit and composition, the trio's skill in merging their instruments creates a saturating sonic experience. From the onset of 'V1.1', Malone's sine waves meld with string overtones to create a spiritual double to the enveloping organ of her solo work. On 'V2.3' the deep ululations of Railton's cello or O'Malley's guitar shine through, their elegant drones occasionally – and characteristically – piercing.

Malone describes the music as extending from the endlessness of the pandemic days of 2020, when time blurred hazily into itself. Distilling single moments of note or "favourite tracks" from a performance so focused on a contiguous journey seems as aimless a task as attempting to fully describe a single tree in a wood on a distant hill. Once familiar, you could pick your choice moments, but the most compelling aspect of this album – a clear remnant of what was originally a live performance – is the effect of the full duration.

**FREDDIE HUDSON**

# Label Profile

**Label**: Golden Lion Sounds
**Location**: Todmorden
**Est**: 2020

**Potted History**: "The pandemic had taken over hope, jobs and inspiration, and creative entertainment had ceased, including at our establishment, the Golden Lion pub," says Golden Lion Sounds label co-founder Matthanee Nilavongse. "We tried setting up an oriental food supermarket in the pub and doing cooking classes online, but this only did so much – we were missing the music and wanted to do something about it. On a quiet New Year's Eve in 2020, I was reflecting on the idea that my partner Richard Walker had about wanting to set up a label based out of Todmorden.

"I asked a friend who runs Basin Rock – also out of Todmorden – for guidance about starting up a label. And I spoke to my friend Louis Sweeting, who has vast experience of staging illegal raves, and producing and promoting club events in Manchester. Louis has always had a great DIY attitude – putting on gigs with pretty big professional acts using pound shop microphones and equipment from skips! His experience and foresight helped us to take the plunge with a 'yes we can' attitude."

**Mission Statement**: "The name Golden Lion Sounds is straightforward – it's the sound of the people who have connected with the Golden Lion itself. Praise also needs to be given to Russ Marland, a former Haçienda resident whose night 'Out In The Sticks' at Blue Note in Todmorden gained somewhat legendary status within the north of England. Russ set up a crowdfunder for the Golden Lion which helped massively in keeping the place afloat during the pandemic and allowing for the creation of the label."

**Key Artists & Releases**: "When we needed tracks for the first two releases, local bands Working Men's Club, W H Lung, The Lounge Society and The Orielles – who've all played at the Golden Lion – didn't hesitate to contribute. This shows how strong the community is that we have up here. Some of the other seven-inch highlights from the label are releases from David Holmes and Raven Violet, JARV IS…, and The Summerisle Trio – an offshoot project by Sean Johnston."

**Future Plans**: "Our upcoming releases – tracks from The Utopia Strong and Richard Norris – are exciting," reveals Nilavongse. "We hope the label can provide some hope in difficult times and continue to support those involved in the music industry. I understand that the record business is not for the faint-hearted, but luckily at the Golden Lion we have no fear."

**Any Other Business**: "Our aim will always be to keep supporting local artists. Our newest and first full-length album release, 'Future Of The Sea' by local band Plank, shows how we can have mutually beneficial relationships with local artists. Our record label is the product of turning a negative situation into a positive one."

**For more, see goldenlionsounds.bandcamp.com**

# First And Last And Always

**Paul Wolinski** of 65daysofstatic on the first and last albums he bought, and an all-time favourite

**FIRST**

## ROCKET FROM THE CRYPT

**Scream, Dracula, Scream!**

INTERSCOPE, 1995

"This was the first album that I legit bought myself – with earnings from my first part-time job – from Our Price on Market Street in Manchester in the summer of 1995. For some reason I was torn between this or 'The Sun Is Often Out' by Longpigs. Either one of the best, most incendiary, urgent, joyful punk albums ever written, or sensible 90s indie? I often wonder how my life would have turned out if I'd chosen the wrong one."

**LAST**

## GODSPEED YOU! BLACK EMPEROR

**G_d's Pee AT STATE'S END!**

CONSTELLATION, 2021

"Godspeed are one of my few 'forever bands'. I'll follow them until the end. So many other bands I fervently believed in have fallen away, not through any fault of their own but just as my own relationship to music changes. But I'll always pay attention to Godspeed. 'G_d's Pee' is probably my favourite release of theirs in the last decade. It doesn't quite top their first run of releases, but then, what does?"

**ALWAYS**

## ORBITAL

**In Sides**

INTERNAL, 1996

"This album should be put in a museum. On a plinth. We should hook up speakers to every lamppost and broadcast it across the world on a loop. 'The Box' is just astonishing. 'Out There Somewhere?' should be talked about in the same breath as Rachmaninoff's 'Symphony No 2'. It's that good. This record should be taught in school and there should be mandatory listening parties at the start of every club night."

## POLINSKI

**Telex From MIDI City**

DATA AIRLINES

### Multi-layered compositions with heart

A lot has changed in the world since 2019, when Sheffield's 65daysofstatic released 'replicr, 2019'. The album found the four-piece group using algorithms to create complex webs of sound, informed by the ruined Earth of 'Blade Runner' and saturated by a political climate that was more dystopian. Perhaps things haven't changed all that much since 2019…

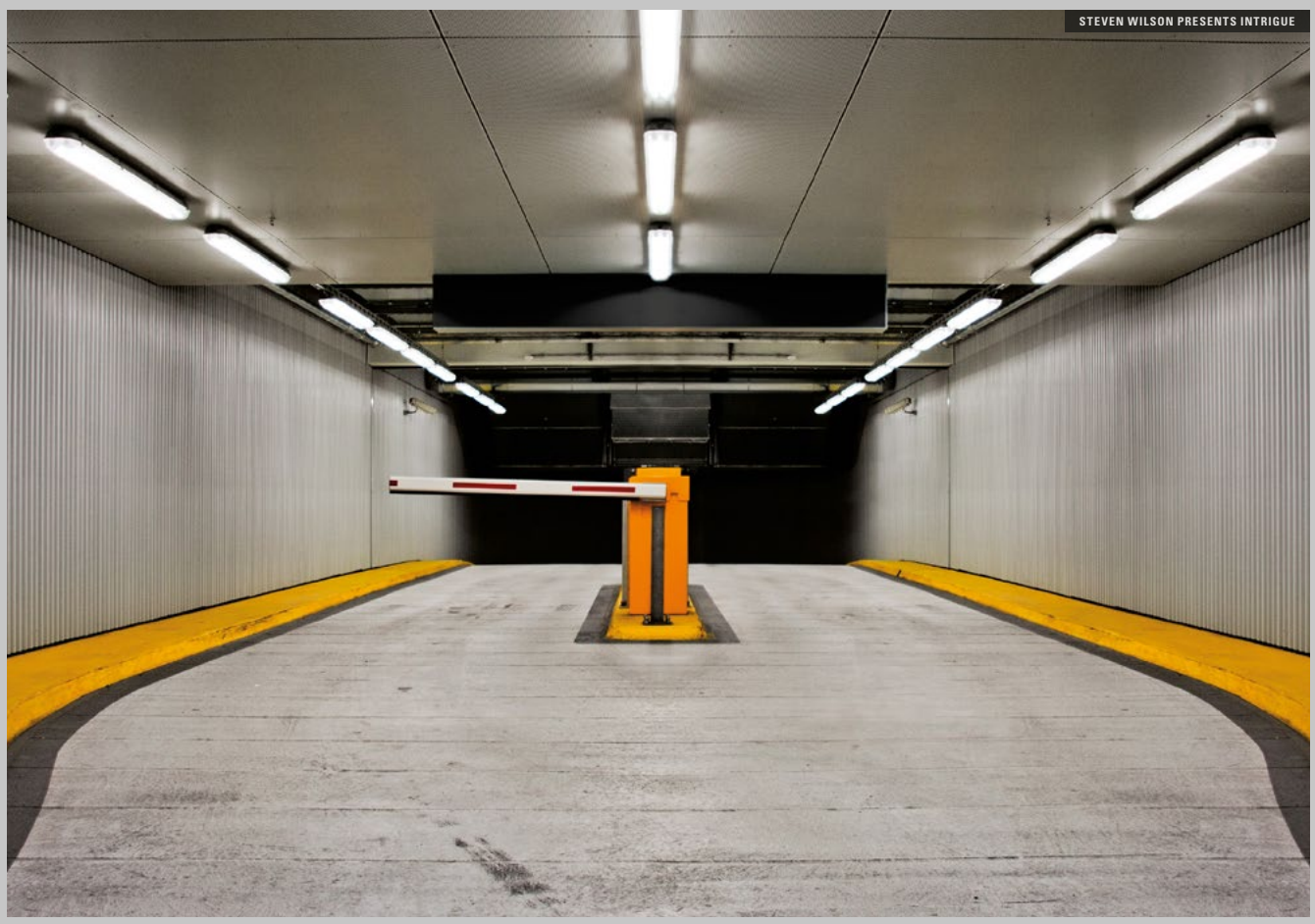
One thing that is different is 65daysofstatic member Paul Wolinski's relationship with artificial intelligence. 'Telex From MIDI City', his third solo album, places its emphasis on humans controlling their art, not outsourcing their creative impulses to technology.

"The idea that AI is a replacement to actual intelligence, especially in art, makes me uneasy," he says. "A lot of what AI does is mindless. The computer doesn't actually know or understand what it's doing or what it's making."

The opening track, 'Distant Friend, I Love You!', is frantic and effervescent, its resolute pace and motion controlled by a high-velocity, precision-sharp hardcore beat that could outrun the fastest supercomputer. In contrast, 'Youth Loop' and 'Proof Of Life' focus their attention on clusters of overlapping melodies and haunting arpeggios that nod to a classical sensibility. With these two pieces, Wolinski is audibly critiquing the idea that this type of music could ever be generated on the fly via AI – it's something of an insult to any composer who has poured their life, soul and emotions into pages of sheet music.

A cautionary mood stalks 'Night Ocean'. Its central motif is a synth hook that feels like it belongs on the soundtrack to John Carpenter's 'The Thing'. It's rapidly subsumed by tight layers of string sounds moving in many opposing directions, yet in spite of this, it is not euphoric. Instead, you're left experiencing a strange and unsettling feeling of loss and uncertainty. What if there is no way of turning back, it seems to ask? What if your future boss, lover, friend, favourite artist, favourite musician, favourite author are nothing but inhuman algorithms? These are reasons to be fearful, which makes Wolinski's ruminative cynicism all the more necessary. 'Telex From MIDI City' is a stunning, inquisitive and above all deeply human album.

**MAT SMITH**


STEVEN WILSON PRESENTS INTRIGUE

## VARIOUS ARTISTS
**Steven Wilson Presents Intrigue: Progressive Sounds In UK Alternative Music 1979-89**
EDSEL / DEMON

"Ambitious, weird and thrilling music was all around you in the 1980s, if you looked in the right places." So says producer and Porcupine Tree man Steven Wilson, who has put together this thrilling compilation of alternative and angular cuts from the post-punk era.

It's a real melting pot. As well as tracks by familiar artists – Wire, Joy Division, Ultravox, Japan, Cocteau Twins and a host of others – there are countless curios, forgotten gems and the odd surprise or two, all bristling with requisite edge. Dead Can Dance's neoclassical 'The Host Of Seraphim' is as unearthly and haunting as ever. 23 Skidoo's 'The Gospel Comes To New Guinea' revels in its own eclecticism, a delicious fusion of artful clatter-funk, dub and tape FX. And 'Enemies', an unreleased 1980 demo by pre-Kajagoogoo outfit Art Nouveau, fizzes with jaunty, Devo-ish intent.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. With extensive sleeve notes, 'Intrigue' is an exhaustive and superbly curated collection. There's a signed seven-LP edition, too. You know the drill. **VI**

## FIELD LINES CARTOGRAPHER
**This Vibrating Earth**
CASTLES IN SPACE

"Everything we know, from the stars and planets through to the fundamental, subatomic particles that make up all matter, is vibrating – oscillating at its own frequency. The known universe is a symphony." Who better to take us on a sonic journey through the cosmos than Mark Burford? True to his FLC alias, the prolific producer maps out yet another immersive sound world on 'This Vibrating Earth', traversing mountains, gorges and the skies with his hypnotic arsenal of analogue synths and field recordings.

'Thawing Ice Temples' induces a post-torpor state with deep vibrations and overlapping textures, on 'Rain Clouds Descending' electronic bleeps patter, and the reverberant, ringing notes of 'Mountain Icicles' glitter in the bright sun. The reverie is broken by 'Hypogeum', where cold, echoing synths build to a climax of harsh noise before fading away to deathly silence. "At some point in the far, far distant future, we may reach... the 'heat death' of the universe. All this movement, all this vibration, will finally stop and a great silence will descend…" Let's delight in this symphony, while we can. **CF**

## THOMAS TRUAX WITH BUDGIE AND MOTHER SUPERIOR
**Dream Catching Songs**
PSYCHOTEDDY

Lurking in the cobweb-strewn attic of some strange, David Lynch smalltown is a sharp-suited professor with pipecleaner limbs, who – by the pale light of a faded full moon – builds outlandish musical instruments from discarded bike wheels and TV aerials. Thomas Truax, everyone. For 20 years, Truax has constructed his own weird world of fragmented rockabilly and wild-eyed, lo-fi blues, all performed with Heath Robinson gusto on his Stringaling and his Hornicator.

And Budgie? Drummer of Banshees and Slits notoriety, here lending Truax's noir stylings a spontaneous punk energy. "Maybe Elon Musk can spare a few measly pesos / For all us buskers overlooked by the likes of Jeff Bezos," snarls Truax on the garage rock rumble of 'Everything's Going To Be Alright'. And while DIY drum machine Mother Superior certainly makes her presence felt, it's hard not to detect a whiff of 1980s Budgie/Siouxsie outfit The Creatures in the jazzy clatter of 'A Little More Time'. Tremolos twang, lips are curled, and this unlikely threesome have built their own brand of barmy wonder. **BF**

## SUNROOF

**Electronic Music Improvisations Volume 2**

MUTE

As founder of the seminal Mute label and the man behind the extraordinary, pioneering 1978 seven-inch 'TVOD/Warm Leatherette', Daniel Miller's position as a titan of electronic music is undeniable. Even as the head of the Mute empire he remains a creative at heart. As Sunroof, he and fellow Depeche Mode producer Gareth Jones have remixed such music luminaries as Neu!, Can, MGMT and Goldfrapp. In 2021, after a 40-year musical partnership, they released their debut album 'Electronic Music Improvisations Volume 1'. Like the first album, 'Volume 2' was approached with no plan and no rehearsal, just unpatched modular systems and a spirit of adventure.

'November' is all analogue burbles, sonic bursts and hammer beats – the sound, perhaps, of a shabby spacecraft servicing centre in the Sea of Tranquility. 'October' demands a host of remixes – stuttering beats sit atop radio static and chattering electronics. This second Sunroof offering is glitchy and claustrophobic. Impending doom seemingly lurks just beyond every throb and sine wave sweep. Clearly, Miller's influence and creativity remains as unwavering as the bracing analogue sawtooth blasts that powered 'Warm Leatherette' 45 years ago. Roll on 'Volume 3'. **AT**

## LOSCIL & LAWRENCE ENGLISH

**Colours Of Air**

KRANKY

Given that most boys only share their favourite toys with their best mates, Canadian producer Scott Morgan (aka Loscil) must have felt like a seven-year-old allowed to have a go on someone's Xbox when Lawrence English invited him over to Brisbane to use the 100 year-old pipe organ he has employed throughout his career – most prominently on 2021's 'Observation Of Breath'.

Whereas that album focused on the organ's physical reverberations, on 'Colours Of Air' English and Morgan process the instrument's rich resonant tones into the sort of enveloping ambience familiar from Loscil long-players like 'Sea Island'. The synaesthetic titles refer to the colour each track evokes, and while there are changes of shade and texture in the journey from glowing opener 'Cyan' to the glowering conclusion of 'Magenta', they're so subtle that they make 'Colours Of Air' the musical equivalent of Rothko's paintings – monotone at first glance, but with intriguing depths if you're prepared to search for them. **PC**

## HEINALI

**Kyiv Eternal**

INJAZERO

There's a moment about halfway through the track 'Botanichnyi Sad' where a chorus of sweet birdsong intermingles with sustained, gently stuttering keys, soothing enough to make you drift off into peaceful sleep. It's hard to fathom that these field recordings are taken from the heart of Kyiv, a city that has withstood Russian attacks for almost 12 months now. But this mood of hope and serenity extends across the 11 pieces on 'Kyiv Eternal', and in it there's also dignity and defiance.

Heinali, aka composer and sound artist Oleh Shpudeiko, crafted this "tribute to the city he loves" to mark the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February. It's not the first time the modular synth artist has used music as a form of resistance. Last April he hosted a livestream fundraiser from a bomb shelter in Lviv, featuring a salvaged modular system. Here, the sound of Kyiv's light rail trundling along on 'Tramvai 14' and voices from the streets of 'Shuliavka In Winter' mix with ambient loops, lovingly echoing the sounds of a city which, despite the odds, still stands tall. **CF**

## THE GO! TEAM

**Get Up Sequences Part Two**

MEMPHIS INDUSTRIES

### Groovy global sounds, continued

Imagine The Go! Team as a slow climb up the property ladder. They started as a one-room bedsit, were knocked through to make a des-res semi-detached, had a huge extension built to accommodate a rapidly growing family, and they're now basically the Metropole Hilton Hotel. And hey, let's assemble everyone in the foyer! From the West African Republic of Benin, there's the youthful Star Feminine Band. From India comes Bollywood singer Neha Hatwar, and jetting in from the Japanese J-Pop scene is Lucie Too vocalist, Kokubo Chisato. Then there's Brooklyn rapper Nitty Scott, ex-Apples In Stereo drummer Hilarie Bratset, and… oh, hang on. Somebody open the fire escape door, it's getting mighty crowded in here.

What began as the solo project of Brighton bedroom tinkerer Ian Parton has become an expansive global concern, but it's a testament to Parton's pop chops that the international approach never feels contrived. From the Star Feminine Band's magnificent mob-handed French chants on thunderous opener 'Look Away, Look Away' to Scott's fluid rapping on the sugar-charged 'Whammy-O', it's a seamless patchwork held together by tightly knitted grooves. And there's even a welcome return for the breakout star of 2021's 'Get Up Sequences Part One', with teenage rapper Indigo Yaj adding Detroit grit to 'Divebomb'. It's an irresistible paean to pro-choice activism – "Taking notice, got focus, never slowing down / No permission, tuition, yeah, no supervision…"

But let's not forget the nuclear Go! Team family, either. Longstanding frontwoman Ninja is a force of cosmic nature on 'Gemini', a mystical hip hop homage to the band's globe-trotting aesthetic. "From where I am, I can see the Nile, the Hoover Dam / From Zaire to Korea, over Tanzania, saw the cherry blossom in Japan". And Niadzi Muzira is a vocalist of rare charm, turning the jaded romance of 'Getting To Know (All The Ways We're Wrong For Each Other)' into a joyous cross between Imperial-phase 'Sesame Street' and peak-era Jackson Five.

Like all the best hotels, you know exactly what you're going to get. Slick service with all the trimmings, and an air of indulgent luxury. But for sheer joie de vivre and the coolest beats in East Sussex, The Go! Team continue to justify their five star rating.

**BOB FISCHER**

## ORBITAL

**Optical Delusion**

LONDON

### Hartnoll brothers' dancefloor dominion

I've rarely been sweatier and happier amid the head-nodding masses than at an Orbital concert, and from the first note, their 10th album plonks us at the centre of the rave. It's the delirious garage snap of 'Ringa Ringa'. Or the mechanoid mayhem of 'Day One', complete with climactic 'Snivilisation'-style synth snarls. Or the boisterous 'Dirty Rat' collaboration with the ever-spirited Sleaford Mods, the closest the Hartnolls get to a chant from the terraces. Altogether now – "And my heart will bleed!". Tunes for communal boogies.

The cold snap of pandemic denied us that rave. Time became a monotonous loop. In one of several references to this collective crisis, flaky snakes of melody flow into airy Amen breaks on 'The New Abnormal'. The plague song 'Ring A Ring O' Roses' choruses 'Ringa Ringa', with folk ensemble The Mediaeval Baebes resembling horror film spectres. And the hamster-wheeling drum 'n' bass of 'Requiem For The Pre-Apocalypse' reminds us of times that were.

Still, let's keep things light, eh? 'Optical Delusion' is dominated by guest stars, a frothing Goldfrappuccino of vocal delights. The dandelion-seeds bleeps on 'Home' are little match for the hurricane force of Anna B Savage's mournful song. Brighton indie rockers Penelope Isles sound reproachful on the fuzzy pop of 'Are You Alive?'. Those trippy snares feel oh-so 'Brown Album'. On 'Day One', a remix of a score that Paul Hartnoll produced for a showcase of giant animatronic grotesques, Dina Ipavic's perfectly mangled vocals sound like they come straight from the 'In Sides' playbook.

There's more. The downbeat 'Moon Princess' sees Coppé, the proclaimed "godmother of Japanese electronica", brilliantly mired in Massive Attack's murkiest moments. The energy perhaps dissipates when The Little Pest appears, an unidentified artist listed in the blurb as "mysterious". Phil messing around with a vocoder? With these introspective electro meanderings, we've left the dancefloor and gone for a piddle.

With '30 Something' and soundtrack album 'The Pentaverate' released merely months ago, the brothers Hartnoll are having something of a rebirth. There are allusions here to past albums and (hopefully) a past pandemic. But the album's buildiest builds and peakiest peaks are designed for dancing. 'Optical Delusion' is all about the delirium of the club. Come on, let's hug it out you sweaty lot.

**FAT ROLAND**

REVIEWS BY
JEREMY ALLEN,
PAUL CLARKE,
BOB FISCHER,
CLAIRE FRANCIS,
CARL GRIFFIN,
VELIMIR ILIC,
FREDDIE HUDSON,
MARTIN JAMES,
FAT ROLAND,
MAT SMITH,
WILL SIMPSON,
SPENSER TOMSON,
ANTHONY THORNTON,
BEN WILLMOTT

# BANGING ON

Codpieces, pointy bras, Kraftwerk with muskets... he thinks he's in a period drama. Don't worry, it'll pass. Just try not to look him in the eye

**WORDS AND PICTURES: FAT ROLAND**

Forsooth, my liege. You may wonder why I'm wearing this generous hoop skirt, a feathery bonnet in the shape of a distressed flamingo, and a silk cummerbund fashioned into a spectacular codpiece. I've dabbed so much rouge on all four of my cheeks, I look embarrassed from every possible angle. This is because I have decided that my life is now a period drama. I now live in Regency England where everyone eats gout for breakfast and has pheasants for wigs. I've embraced the world of foppish dukes and sprawling mansions and flowing gowns and trains that actually go "choo choo".

I'm also doing a lot of swooning. You have to swoon a lot in a costume drama. Especially if anyone mentions anything rude, like underskirts, britches or bodices. What even is a bodice? Is it a kind of garter? Is it those things you tape over your nipples? Can you snort it? I'd google what a bodice is, but we don't have computers in olden times. I'm writing this using a quill and parchment, which was on offer at Ryman's. If you look closely, my letter Ss look like curly Fs, like what they do on gravestones. But don't get the two confused, otherwise you'll end up with Tranf-Europe Expreff by Krastwerk from Düffeldors, and then where would we be?

Speaking of Krast… no, er, Kraftwerk, I'm using music to make me feel all velveteen and grand. I'm listening to new romantic bands because they were the period dramas of their period. You know the acts I mean. The Duran Durans, Spandex Ballet, Loads Of Seagulls. Their hair was made of angles, and one of them painted a stripe across his face before embarking on a spree of 18th century gun crime. In the words of 'True' by Spandau Bidet: "True true true / Ooby-dooby-doo / Girl you know it's true / Da-ba-dee, da-ba-doo." At least I think that's how the song goes. I've never really listened to it.

Since the 1980s, music has lost its connection with high-class drapery. Grunge bands wore all sorts of tatty old rags, which they could then use to clean their filthy guitars. Hip hop acts wore clothes so baggy, everyone looked like melted denim candles. The only nod to decorum has been Madonna. Her pointy Jean-Paul-Ringo Gaultier bra is definitely something Queen Victoria would have worn, because Queeny Vic was very practical and could have used them as traffic cones when her Ford Fiesta broke down.

Period clothes don't suit me much. The plunging neckline shows all 17 of my man boobs, and I don't like corsets because when you lace them up, they squeeze your internal organs until you look like an hourglass and I don't need an hourglass, thank you very much, because I've got a perfectly good stopwatch on my phone.

Period dramas are all about embellishment, which is a fancy word for fancy. Frills and frocks, courtiers and carafes. Modern techno music is the opposite of all that. It's functional and motorik, which is a fancy word for motoric. Can you imagine Kragworp – sorry, Kraftwerk – dressed as 18th century dandies? Stood at their keyboards, brandishing their muskets? Keyboards which are pulled by horses? I say "stood"… they're rakishly sprawled across pouffes. They're all called Laurence De Plonkitune, and they're forever chugging smelling salts to prevent them succumbing to the lead paint coating their synthesisers.

That's a ridiculous image you've come up with there, dear reader, and it's proof that techno has no place in costume period drama Queeny Regency choo-choo times. I'm feeling faint. I might swoon. Quick, hand this magazine back to your maidservant before my codpiece falls off.

CHORD
Chord Electronics Ltd.

Mojo 2

# SIMPLY WITHOUT EQUAL

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